ODYSSEY NORTHWEST

A Trilogy of Poems on the Northwest Passage

by

Gerald St. Maur

Boreal Institute for Northern Studies
Occasional Publication No. 18
1983

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Occasional Publication No. 18
ISSN 0068-0303

Odyssey Northwest
ISBN 0-919058-29-9 (hard cover)
ISBN 0-919058-30-2 (soft cover)

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To the memory of Mary and George Lock

Preface

I did not set out to write these poems as a trilogy; nor did I choose the themes, forms or points of view at the outset. The entire work began as a modest exercise in narrative verse using the northwest passage as a subject of historical significance and suitably epic proportions. However, the more I read on the subject the more I realized it was a uniquely Canadian odyssey of enormous geographical and temporal — not to mention literary — scope. My own study and writing thus became a personal journey among and along with the various *dramatis personae* — adventurers, pioneers and natives — who each played a part in the suspended tale of a search for a shorter route to ancient Cathay.

In the beginning I became intrigued with Martin Frobisher's first voyage which was launched in the reign of that most splendid sovereign Elizabeth I. This poem was conceived as a swashbuckling adventure related in rhymed couplets by an anonymous observer. Why Frobisher in particular, and why this rhymed form? I cannot truly say, except to express my belief that the story and the vehicle combine well as an early chapter in the northwest drama. No conscious theme was imposed on the first draft, but after the writing was finished it was evident that *discovery* had been the implicit theme: hence the title.

The chronological sequencing, so natural in *Frobisher,* seemed to be quite sterile in the story of Hudson's last voyage, which next suggested itself. Again, I cannot honestly state why I chose this particular subject, or why the courtroom trial occurred to me as the natural vehicle for the story. Clearly, a rhymed form would have been too artificial and I therefore chose blank verse throughout, except for a few critically placed lines. The theme emerged from the first draft as *judgement* and thus dictated the title.

The theme which emerged from the first draft of the third poem was *enterprise,* suggested in part by the name Franklin gave to his wintering place. This story, like the others, came to me as yet another poignant episode in the continuing saga. If Frobisher's voyage is taken to be among the opening salvos of a long campaign, the voyage of Franklin must be viewed as a decisive salvo fired after a great many ballistical calculations had been made. Despite the characteristic convention of a junior naval officer on a planned mission, the tale is told by Franklin himself using the epic tradition of beginning in the middle; earlier events are covered in

retrospect. After some experimentation, free verse emerged as the best vehicle for the informal expression of the mental and emotional diary lying behind his written diary.

The trilogy spans several centuries of exploration and adventure. It contains three themes — discovery, judgement and enterprise — which, taken together, sum up a great deal of the overall theme — the journey of exploration: not a single journey, by a single figure, but yet a journey with a single central purpose and, like all journeys, revealing and reflecting the great many and varied purposes of mankind venturing through life itself.

Odyssey Northwest is Canadian history only *one remove* from Canadian myth. The theme is the outward journey driven by an inner spirit of adventure. Merely the search for a shorter trading route? Hardly. To make such a claim is to express a very limited view of the human condition; one might as well claim, with equal validity, that the telephone directory is merely a list of consumers. The Elizabethans, and those that succeeded them, faced challenges well beyond international trade: political intrigue, religious persecution, crime, unemployment; even the very survival of their nation. Not surprisingly, the explorers themselves emerge as complex personalities confronted by complicated and dangerous situations.

The Frobisher poem carries the theme of discovery — his discovery: of the passage to Cathay; of new land; of new peoples; of treachery and deceit; of gold; and, most important, of himself. It is also the discovery of Frobisher by others: by the Queen; by the populus; and by his own crew.

The Hudson poem carries the theme of judgement. Hudson's own judgement is repeatedly called into play to reveal his character, his ability and his state of mind: in handling crew members; in escaping icebergs; in securing and distributing provisions; in interpreting the charts; in breaking tradition; in dealing with natives; in handling mutiny. The judgement of others, particularly their judgement of Hudson himself, also runs throughout the poem: the judgement of the crew in general, and Greene, Jewitt and Wilson in particular; the early and later judgement of Diggs, Wolstenholme and Smith; and the judgement of the Admiralty Court on which the life of the storyteller depends.

The Franklin poem carries the theme of enterprise in three senses: the ironic name of the fort as the focal point to which the drama converges: the resourcefulness of the expedition party, under extremely difficult conditions; and the

journey itself as a well-intentioned but ill-considered venture. A subtheme contrasts the time-honoured enterprise of the indigenous population with the schematic enterprise of their visitors.

Odyssey Northwest is not a work of history, although each narrative is based on historical fact. My objective was to write poetry, not despite the facts but within them. The historical record has therefore been used as the thread from which the poetry has been woven. I can not claim complete historical accuracy but I have not knowingly distorted the established record. Each poem describes various scenes, events and attributes utterances of which there is no record: they are purely imaginative descriptions consistent with the known facts; and I have occasionally borrowed the literal record, in word or phrase. Conflict between the record and the poetry has always been resolved in favour of the latter. Thus, in diction, spelling, grammar and metre, the record is preserved in spirit only. I believe the story itself has been told faithfully in a form to suit the contemporary mind and appeal to the contemporary ear. Ultimately, the reader must judge.

It has taken four years to bring the trilogy to the point where it is ready for publication. Successive drafts were typed with care and understanding by Cathy Dyck, Reta Koslo and Beverly Glover, to each of whom I am very grateful. I would also like to give thanks to my friends Ted Blodgett and Tom Wayman who were kind enough to read earlier drafts. Much as I have benefited from their comments, I cannot hold them in the least responsible for any remaining flaws.

In my research, and especially prior to writing the first drafts, I was greatly assisted by the staff of the Boreal Institute for Northern Studies at the University of Alberta; to the Director, Mr. R. S. Jamieson, to the Head Librarian, Mrs. G. A. Cooke, and to Ms. Anita Moore, I am especially grateful. In my own office, Dorothy Moravcik was a very valuable assistant. And I must not forget my indebtedness to Clive Holland and other members of staff in the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge University; they were very accommodating.

Finally, and inevitably, I must pay tribute to my wife, Edna, who has put up with my quiet habit with a cheerfulness and resignation that place me immeasurably in her debt. But she knows that.

Gerald St. Maur

Edmonton
January 1982

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MARTIN FROBISHER, HIS DISCOVERY

Elizabeth at Greenwich Palace broods
When suddenly a cannon crack intrudes — Martin salutes Elizabeth at Greenwich.
And turns her head towards the morning light
Sparking a quick enquiry into the fight.
"No battle ma'am," the Secretary calls
From near the window where the scene enthralls
Him now, his eyebrows high — the witness mute
Of three rigged vessels standing in salute.
The Queen, arising stiffly, peered through
The lattice window, smiling at the view
Of two small barks and, smaller yet, a pinnace
(Which scene must pluck the comic strings within us,
For laughter is what any sailor begs
Who voyages to sea in shells of eggs).
"God's truth!", the Queen exclaimed in quick surprise,
"What men are these and what their enterprise?
They sail for certain on a mission grave."
Thus speaking she returned a graceful wave, — Elizabeth acknowledges salute.
Spun upon her heel and crossed the floor,
More heartened, yet more pensive, than before.

Her Majesty resumed affairs of State — Elizabeth reflects on enemies . . .
Bidding her Secretary note the date.
Well she knew the poignance of this hour
When foreign kings conspired to make her cower,
When Portugal and Spain made idle boast
And rattled golden sabres off each coast;
But never has a Queen been more resolved
To see the strength of enemies dissolved;
And never captains held in more regard
Than those who sought to write the oceans' carde.
She smiled to think of Drake's most cunning plan
To hide a Golden Hind in Pelican,
And mused upon the little eggshell fleet
Which, starting on their venture, stopped to greet
Their Queen, who now enquired the captain's name. — . . . is intrigued by Martin.

"Ah! Martin Frobisher, I know the same.
'Twas Warwick's pleading, and Lord Burleigh too,
Secured the right to sail northwest where few
Are bold enough to venture or to face
The ghost of Willoughby — a deathly place!
Go tell the captain he may come and take
His leave the morrow, then may weave his wake."

Secretary bids Martin take his leave on the next day.

The Secretary bowed and went in haste
Upon this mission little to his taste.
He bid an oarsman pull him to the ship
Where Captain Martin stood, hands on hip,
To greet the royal messenger so peeved
To find himself on board so sharply heaved;
But gathered his composure quickly and
Delivered Queen Elizabeth's command.
The captain bid him thank the Queen and say
His tribute and respect he'd proudly pay,
And in the meanwhile hold his anchor steady,
Drink her health, and make his vessels ready.

Martin recalls plans and preparations for voyage.

For many months had Martin laid his plans
To build this fleet and gather up the hands
Upon whose skill and courage he'd rely
To bring each vessel home again, or die
In bold defiance of that northern sea
Whose winds and waves unleashed ferocity.
The venture was a dream of many years,
Of days he felt on fire with hopes and fears,
Of nights he burned through candles with his friend,
Young Michael Lock, whom fortune did attend;
At sea they'd shared their lives in youthful days
And now as partners sang each other's praise.
One vessel they had built and one had bought
But fitted both with tackle newly wrought
To heave and run free but not entice
The freezing spray to cast a block in ice.

Instruments most cunning Martin found
With which to chart his course the world around;
Below the deck, provisions for a year:
A hoard of bread and meat, five tons of beer,
And many herbs and medicines to cheat
Sly sickness that might creep about the fleet.

Gently tugging cables in the night
The vessels rocked, impatient for their flight,
And on the morrow Martin strode ashore
Where kings and captains all had trod before.
He marched into the Palace where, although
He moved with every flourish he could show,
The roughness in his manner and his face
Betrayed the truth, Court was not his place:
Plainly dressed, coarseness in his voice,
He was adventurer — the perfect choice.
Elizabeth's shrewd eye in instant scan
Saw Martin as no ordinary man,
And thus began her questioning to hear
A plan that fell as music on her ear.

Martin attends the Queen.

"My voyage, ma'am, will seek a quicker way
Of reaching the Moluccas and Cathay.
The learned scholars say that it is true,
Far north of Canada, a passage through
The icy waters to the peaceful sea
Awaits the claim of your great Majesty.
'Tis my belief the passage can be found,
Stout fortresses be raised upon its ground,
And citizens of England can find peace
In colonies where trade will never cease.
'Tis better that we ship our lawless breed
Abroad than catch them hungry, then to feed
The gallows. I desire to serve the realm
And seek those hidden straits, to place the helm
Of trade in cloth and gold in English hands

Martin explains his voyage to Elizabeth.

And wrest it from the Spaniards where it stands.
I sail aboard the *Gabriel* newly wrought,
Captained by Master Hall of good report;
While Master Gryffyn, hailing from Welsh ground,
Will command the *Michael* newly found;
And lastly, ma'am, so I might quickly finish,
To aid us near the shore, a shallow pinnace."

Elizabeth asks Martin about himself.

The Queen then asked, her eye sporting a glint,
"Your uncle, he was Master of my Mint?"

"He was indeed, your Majesty. I was
His ward throughout my late school years because,
Upon the death of my dear father, I
Obeyed my mother's wish that I might try
To gather what a youth neglects but grown men need:
Listening to Sir John was wise indeed.
But madam I admit to some excess
In youth — exuberance — I do confess
My sins. Schooling sat not well with me,
And thus I turned to life upon the sea.

Elizabeth taunts Martin about his piratical career.

Elizabeth smiled wryly and remarked,
"And on a spotless life you've since embarked?"

"Nay, ma'am!, that I cannot truly say,
When fortune and temptation sometime stray
Across my bow to put me in such fettle
That I, a man of pride, must show my mettle.
'Tis folly ma'am should others flaunt their gold:
Their future can be very quickly told;
And should they dare insult the English flag,
It is my solemn duty not to lag
And let the haughty villains sail away
(For only when the sun shines is there hay).
Yet seldom does Dame Fortune smile at sea;
This any sailor quickly would agree
Is more than he dare hope till journey's end
When once more he can see this blessed land,

And leap and dance, as free as any kite,
Or singing in the tavern half the night
Make merry till again aboard his ship
He must bend to his task or taste the whip.
Humbly I put it, as a subject loyal,
Any man may claim reward for toil
At sea, on earth, as it is in heaven,
Where all our sins we pray will be forgiven."

The Queen held forth her hand and Martin kissed
The slender fingers resting on his fist,
More used to ropes and spars but here on land
No better use it found nor task more grand.
"May God go with you, captain, on your quest
And may you find this passage north-by-west."

Martin returns to the *Gabriel*.

Martin bowed and quickly took his leave.
Hastening to his oarsman he bid him cleave
A furrow through the river towards his ship
Where once on board he marked the needle tip
And wrote the variation on his chart:
Martin knew that navigator's art
And science were like lanterns to his cause;
So certain of this reckoning he was
That noble Master Dee he had enjoined
To teach his sailors methods newly-coined,
Whereby each bay and cape on which they came
In latitude and longitude could frame
With confidence, and so inscribe the chart
Where white and still the void befrights the heart.

The fleet weighs anchor and sets sail . . .

His first position fixed, Martin made
The long-awaited signal; now they weighed
Their anchors and left drifting with the tide
That swept them slowly seaward while they vied
To hoist their sails and thus each other tease
By catching first the ever-growing breeze.
Soon each vessel showed a puffing sail

That pressed it forward racing in a gale
Which saw each sailor take a firmer grip
On rail and line as wind howled past his ship
And drove it with a might they could not stand —
The gale too much for vessels newly-manned.

. . . but seeks harbour at Harwich.

Hastily to Harwich ran the three
To wait and try their skill on calmer sea,
But day on day brought no new report
Of promise they could quit where they were caught;
And time and time again they put to sea
Only to be beaten back relentlessly.
At last they fought and won their way off shore
And sailors felt their salt sea legs restore
As all three vessels raced on through the spray,
One hundred miles covered each new day:
North they sped to Orkney for provision,
The last that they would load before their mission.

The fleet departs Harwich.

Now the *Gabriel* took a course northwest
Which put the daring trio to the test,
For once the ships had made their final parting
They sailed upon a sea beyond all charting.
But Master Hall and Martin knew their crew
Were spirited, stout-hearted sailors who
In bending to their work in any weather
Knew full well that they were bound together
In serving Martin Frobisher's great aim
Which promised every man his share of fame.
Each ship ran fast across the white-capped sea,
Each sailor helping trim the sails while he
Stood wet with spray and lashed by howling wind
That pressed upon his face and firmly pinned
His soaken shirt against his breast, and chilled
The eyes he raised to watch the canvas filled.

The fleet encounters a storm.

Yet each stout heart rose high upon the swell
As spooning stretched the distance at each bell,

And instruments conspired to do their part
In lengthening the line upon the chart.
The wind inspired grew and whipped the sea
Which rose, a mass of such ferocity
That Martin ordered every boy below,
Protected from the evil in the blow;
And calling on the deck each sturdy hand
Bid sail the straining vessels fully manned.
Canvas rent and lines snapped loose like whips
As sailors climbed about those tortured ships
To furl their sails, badly ripped and holed,
And ride atop the furious storm bare-poled
In hope the wind, though screaming aloft, would fail
To drive them flat by catching on a sail.
None felt comfort near as steepening waves
Rose high above them, lowering them in graves
Of water which disgorged them on each crest;
And thus each ship, at Neptune's stern behest,
Was heaved and tossed as waves rose and sank,
And men and vessels foaming gallons drank.

Martin tightly gripped the rail and prayed
Deliverance for his men; but unafraid
He stood, the spray lashing in his eyes,
Watching and checking each vessel fall and rise.
Suddenly his breast was filled with fear — Pinnace lost in storm.
The pinnace, lately viewed, was nowhere near,
And quickly though he veered to the scene
He found not one small thing where she had been;
The swell of grief flooded through his breast,
His brain confirming what his heart had guessed.
Sorrow's ebb is cruelly slow; and now
He stood alone and watched the tossing bow,
Wondering would the storm ever abate
Or would it drown them all — leave too late.
Yet no relief was theirs for eight full days,

When men and boys cried in grateful praise;
Slowly smiles returned to each taut lip
As new sails bellied gently on each ship —
A steady breeze coursed north-by-west once more
And pushed them hard towards a foreign shore.

Gabriel and *Michael* sail on.

The captain entered in the *Gabriel's* log
That, rising white-horizoned in the fog,
A shoreline loomed: was this the Friesland coast
That none had seen, despite old Zeno's boast?
He ordered that the barks press closer to
The new found coast to seek a better view
And sent the *Gabriel's* boat and six to set
Their foot upon the land, soon to be met
Afloat by towering islands wrought of ice,
With sunken spikes to sink them in a trice:
Great pinnacles of steeples sculpted high
Disappeared within the cloudy sky
Where birds they heard calling yet unseen,
Sirens of this white and eerie scene.
The men looked up, rowed cautiously about,
Each moment adding fear to their doubt;
An icy air crept coldly through his bones
As each man heard again the Titans' groans,
The floating hulks carving each other's sides,
Grinding their tortured bodies on the tides,
And threatening the flimsy boat which came
About to leave this deadly, dodging game.
No sooner were they back on board than mist
Came skulking round them, spreading, till a fist
Could not be seen when held at full arm's length
And, with the wind without one ounce of strength,
The vessels lost their sight, absorbed in cloud
That placed on men a veil so like a shroud.

Friesland reached.

Skiff explores the icy coast.

So fearful turned the *Michael's* trembling crew
Their ripe imagination quickly grew,

Seeding such terror in each quivering heart
That Master Gryffyn gave orders to depart,
Convinced, or so he claimed, of such great dread
That Martin and his crew were surely dead:
Cowardice finds reason where there's none,
And when the fog was lifted he was gone.

Michael quits the scene.

Men upon the *Gabriel's* deck looked round her,
Believing they had heard the *Michael* founder;
Which tragic news caused Martin to declare
He'd die or see the end of this affair.
Each man surveyed the scene, empty now,
And each made to himself the silent vow
To carry hopes and dreams of comrades drowned
And plant them in the fertile land they found
When once they reached the passage to Cathay
And dropped their anchor, nestled in a bay.

Martin resolved to sail on alone.

Resolute, their spirits now restored,
The men upon the *Gabriel* looked toward
The south and west. Following command,
They sailed their ship along the coast till land
Had disappeared from view up in the nest,
And turned their bow once again due west.
Soon the wind blew cheeks in every sail,
Stiffened, and unleashed a powerful gale
Which hourly swelled its force and sharply lashed
The topmost canvas — all that clung attached —
And snapped the mast clean through above the main —
Aye, never was that topsail seen again.
But worse the wind grew mightier, and howled
And screamed down from the rigging it had fouled:
It blew them leagues away off their course,
And hurled itself upon them with such force
It pushed their masts down on the boiling sea
And kept them there with strength the Deity
Could use to show his might — or yet his wrath —

Gabriel encounters heavy storm.

By flattening them upon their watery path.
Floundering on her side the *Gabriel* sank,
As through her open deck she slowly drank
Great draughts, swilling in her belly where
Her crew, swamped, and struggling for air,
Felt the vessel dead upon the waves
Which beckoned them towards their watery graves.
For grave it be a vessel lose her helm
And wallow while the torrents overwhelm
The deck, to pluck from every sailors heart
The courage he had brought with him to start
The voyage doomed to end this sorry day,
As helpless on her side the *Gabriel* lay.

Gabriel blown flat.

Dauntless, Martin caught his crew's despair
And sent his courage howling through the air.
With axe in hand he crawled out on the deck
And hacked the mizzen clear of the wreck,
With such success the crew attacked the main
And Martin had to order them refrain.
Steadily, his voice directed his men
While hope was fast receding from them when
The *Gabriel* raised her masts out of the sea
And every man fell quickly to his knee,
Pouring tears of gratitude but still
Exhausted as he knelt there in the swill
That poured forth from the ship, back into
The source — the infinite — that now he knew.

Martin cuts away mizzen mast.

Rescued from their fate the crew took score
And rallied to their captain's throaty roar
Which bid them hoist a sail, give their best,
And hold the *Gabriel's* bow to south and west.
Lame but brave they swept through the storm
Heroic in the tasks they would perform,
Which kept the *Gabriel* racing on her course
Until the wind had spent its mighty force

Crew rallies to Martin.

Gabriel sails on.

And left the vessel cruising on her way,
Two masted now but rigged in proud array
That served her well. Martin then declared
'Twas time to see the mainmast well repaired
And step a stout new mizzen into place
To help them forge their way at greater pace;
Which well it did, speeding them due west,
Resuming once again their worthy quest.

Not many days nor many cups of grog
Were memories when dimly through the fog
Master Hall, with reckoning precise,
Sighted off the bow a coast of ice:
West by sixty-four, north by sixty-two,
A continent stood clearly in their view,
Which judging by the snow upon the shore
Appeared to be the Land of Labrador,
Waiting here, just as the learneds teach —
America and Canada's north reach.
Excitement filled their hearts to know that they
Had found new land, of value who could say?
Queen Elizabeth Foreland it would be,
In tribute to Her Gracious Majesty.

New land sighted.

Sailing towards the coast without delay
They came upon a sight to bring dismay;
Lying off the shore one hundred yards
Ice islands hove, an anxious pack of guards,
To hold the coming mariners at bay
And throw a threatening welcome in their way.
A cable's length offshore they heaved the lead
But at one hundred fathoms found no bed;
No bottom and no harbour waited here,
So far they were from shore, and yet so near.
The captain bid the crew lower the boat
And set four men with Master Hall afloat
To see if they could find a channel, safe

Coast covered by icebergs.

Enough to miss the monstrous islands' chafe,
To slip between their glassy sides and reach
A shallow cove or yet a sheltered beach.
Now Master Hall, though safety he'd disdain,
Searched every gap but ever searched in vain;
Intent, he chose an island to approach
Which shook and reared before they could encroach
Within its shadow, lurching past their eyes
That grew so wide to see its body rise
And crash down in the sea, a towering cliff
Whose crushing weight nigh fell upon their skiff.
Fearful that the others might overturn,
The sailors took their boat on its return
Without the news that Martin hoped to hear,
And leaving him no choice then but to steer
Due north to seek a sheltered bay and probe
This shore so far across our spinning globe.

Hall explores perilous icebergs in skiff.

But as they sailed, the lookout in the nest
Reported that the land away off west
Was lost from sight, nor hid in any fog,
And disappointment crept into the log
As mile by mile they ventured to the north
Without a single prospect coming forth,
Until from up aloft a cry sang out
And once again they heard the joyous shout.
"Land ho! Due north. Land ho!", the message came,
And every mouth the Blessed Virgin's name
Called forth as sailors clambered to the deck,
Scanning the horizon with craning neck,
And Captain Martin surveyed through his glass
The contours of this welcome earthy mass.
Here was Asia discovered for the chart,
And there a gulf split continents apart:
Before their eyes a glorious prospect lay;
Here was the passage to Cathay!

Martin sails further north . . .

. . . discovers new headland . . .

. . . and the northwest passage.

Long shrouded by the mist and locked in ice;
Protected, till this Ulysses, once thrice
The strength, had dared take up his glorious task
To glimpse the face behind the icy mask;
And coming now, the conquerer, did thank
The Lord and praise his crew who never shrank
From duties past; nor did they shirk them now,
As fast the *Gabriel* pushed her white-frilled bow
Towards the headland; there, at last, hove to,
Her anchor first to touch the land anew.

The boat was lowered and, with Master Hall — Hall goes ashore . . .
In charge, four sailors launched who would install
The proof that Martin Frobisher laid claim
To land in Queen Elizabeth's fair name;
Which task they did as soon as each man felt
Beneath his foot the steady shore and knelt
Upon the rock, made his silent prayer,
And flung his arms to breathe the bracing air.
Overjoyed, they climbed the tallest hill
And saw they were an island — just a spill
Off this continental coast, so vast, — . . . and surveys frozen prospect.
So white and still, and rigidly held fast
Beneath the ice that spread its groaning weight
Across the water of the new found strait.
Far below, hardly more than a speck,
Lay the *Gabriel* waiting, there on deck
Each man and boy bent upon repair:
Splicing lines and stitching canvas tear,
While down below the carpenter stopped leaks — *Gabriel* repaired.
That seeped their soggy misery for weeks.

When the boat returned with Master Hall
The *Gabriel* stood immaculate, and all
Were ready waiting at the passage gate
When, without warning, ice broke out the strait — Ice breaks in strait.
And issued from its mouth a jagged horde

Of islands driving east and straight toward
The *Gabriel,* which at once set sail and weaves
A course more dangerous than anyone believes:
Each island floating with its hulk below
The surface, so deceitful not to show
The helmsman where the glassy jags, that slid
In silence underneath the waves, were hid
To rip a sudden hole, a lethal gash, *Gabriel* dashes between floes.
And quickly bring the sinking deck awash.
But just as Martin took the *Gabriel* past
One island he would face another fast
Bearing down and forcing him to veer
To miss this new protagonist come near,
Then hurry past another spinning by —
White fields whose harvest in white death would lie.
Every man on board the *Gabriel* saw
That all were at the mercy of this thaw
And tuned himself, a pitch above perfection,
In answer to each call for new direction,
And placed in Martin's hands such discipline
That, faced with such encounter, he would win.
This he did, and saw the ice abate
To leave them sailing gently in the strait.

Martin knew that now must come the test Martin sails into strait . . .
To show this strait lay open to the west,
And so he set a course that lay between
The two stark continents which flanked the scene
With lofty cliffs and glaciers on each hand,
Whispering past his ear of frozen land
Which soon he saw with each long summer day
Was nought if not the passage to Cathay.
No further proof he needed to explore;
He'd sailed one hundred miles and fifty more
Along the strait to which he gave his name . . . and names it after himself.
As further south Magellan did the same.

Down his anchor sank beside an isle — Martin goes ashore . . .
He chose that he might see for many a mile
Beyond; he took the boat with Master Hall
To search this land that held him in its thrall.
Its bleakness and its majesty could tell
A tale that tingled in his mind — a spell
Upon his head. His eyes, alerting his brain,
Cast round the ground and saw — and looked again;
Were these the ashes of a fire? The doubt — . . . to discover a camp fire . . .
Burned through his mind with creatures thereabout
Whose form and appetite not even he
Could tell; their choice was but to flee
Or scale the highest ground, survey the scene,
And better judge what cold grey ash might mean.
No sooner started up the nearest hill
When suddenly they felt their blood run chill.
Lurking in the brush half out of sight
A human-headed deer leapt out in flight:
Full tilt across at Martin, bowed its head, — . . . and wildlife.
And forced him to defence or there lie dead;
But skillfully he kept the beast at bay
Until it lost its nerve and charged away,
Scattering men who hastened to the peak
To find the prospect each had come to seek.
As far as they could see to east and west
The passage lay before them, and their quest
Had proven worth their labour and their pain
While God had shown them where the strait had lain.

As Martin's eyes swept round the quiet scene — Martin surveys prospect . . .
His thoughts returned to where his gracious Queen
Had bid farewell and wished upon his cause
Good fortune and safe journey to these shores
Which harboured now the *Gabriel* and her crew,
The remnants of his fleet, the precious few
Who'd stood against the odds and won their wager

That there split America and Asia
A route which promised riches for each ship
Whose men had courage enough to make the trip.
Musing, he beheld within the strait
A school of fish with bodies elongate;
Porpoises or seals they seemed to be
But yet — he looked again, and then could see
That these were men, each in a leathern boat
That fitted round him snug as any coat,
The two together moving just like one
Within the pack that pressed its way along
The shore, bent on capturing its prey —
Which now occurred to Martin must be they!
He jumped up to his feet and quickly told
His men the peril there they could behold,
And bid them hasten down to the boat
Before the hunters barred their way afloat
And forced them to defend their very lives,
Which they would do, and do with open knives.

. . . to discover savage raiding party.

At once the sailors scrambled down the hill,
Their flailing legs not slowing down until
They splashed into the water and aboard,
Just in time to beat the frantic horde
Of savages who swarmed along beside
And shouted at the prize they'd been denied;
Off the shore the strangers dropped away
And left the sailors where the *Gabriel* lay.
As soon as he had climbed on board each man
Told his shipmates of the savage plan,
And how they would have surely been waylaid
If they had failed to see the coming raid.
At this the captain called upon his crew
To exercise great caution till they knew
The habits and intentions of these men
Whom he proclaimed they'd surely meet again,

Return flight to *Gabriel*.

Martin calls for cautious trade . . .

For he must learn their willingness to trade
And see if they would take the trinkets made
In London in exchange for hide and fur,
Much to the pleasure of each mariner.

When next the curious savages came near
The captain made them signs they need not fear, . . . and invites savages on board.
And bid them come on board, which they did,
While each tar kept his weapon neatly hid.
The savages showed flashing teeth and smiles
That cunningly disguised their subtle wiles;
Their tawny skin the sailors quickly saw
From Noah came, not Ethiopia;
Like Tartars they had noses flat and broad Savages described.
And hair as black as any pitch that poured;
And from their antics in the rigging they
Drew gasps for feats of strength, despite their play.
Soon they became intrigued with any glass
Or nail or buckle that could clearly pass
For metal, which is precious in their land,
Unlike the skins of seals they lay to hand,
And which the savage gladly gave in trade
For tiny trinkets of rare substance made;
Especially if it chimed like a bell
To charm his ear and cast its joyful spell,
As music does for any man who hears
A gentle song which soothes away his fears.

The savages grew bolder and made signs
Of welcome to the sailors, many kinds
Of gesture beckoning them to come and rest Hostages exchanged.
On shore and sleep in peace as weary guest.
But Martin fearing treachery refused,
And showing them that they were not abused
Contrived to keep a savage hostage while
A man was sent on shore to learn the style
In which the savage lived and hunted down

The beasts that wore the coats for London town.

Bearing Master Hall, who would explore,
The *Gabriel's* boat was taken to the shore
Where Martin placed his knife against the throat
Of his quick savage hostage in the boat,
And took him back on board where at length
He fascinated all with vulgar strength;
Astounding them when they saw him eat
Without apparent qualm, their red raw meat;
Intriguing them, and Captain Martin too,
With signs that he could guide the *Gabriel* through
The passage quickly, should they pay him well:
Two days was all he asked — and one big bell.

Hall sent ashore . . .

. . . while savage watched on board.

Tempted, the captain sent a crew of four
To take the *Gabriel's* boat and go ashore
And bring back Master Hall with all good speed,
For now they had a pilot to be freed.
Straight away good Master Hall returned
To tell the captain all that he had learned;
And whereupon the savage stepped on board
The boat and sat without another word,
And waited while the captain told the crew
Exactly what he wanted them to do.
Aye, Martin knew the ways of mortal men,
And plainly warned the boat crew yet again
They must not once be tempted into trade
Or else fall in a trap the savage laid.

Martin decides to use savage as pilot.

Martin carefully instructs boat crew on dangers.

He ordered them to take the boat and stop
Just off the headland rock where they could drop
The savage who could then regain his boat
While from his brethren they would stay remote.
Done with words, he sent them on their way
Bidding them return without delay.
Unseen, he stood and watched them reach the shore
(Savage, bosun and the crew of four)

To leave their erstwhile hostage on the rock,
But then dumbfound their captain — such a shock!
Off they rowed behind the headland wall,
Which meant they now could not be seen at all
Until again their boat hove into view —
And resting on the oars were only two!
This set their captain's fury quick afire;
He bellowed out the order to retire,
Which spurred the rowers back towards the beach
To fetch their shipmates: stranded out of reach,
Beyond the bounds of rescue, out of sight,
Five sailors vainly faced their awful plight.
And Martin waited anxiously until
Of patience he had more than had his fill.

Martin witnesses disobedience...

... and demands immediate return.

Anger surged up through the captain's breast,
Seeing the ruse played out as he had guessed;
Curses spurted quickly from his lip
As he spat and paced about the ship.
Then slowly, as a father sorely tried
By youth's shortcomings he must often chide,
His heart was touched by anguish and despair
As he saw their helpless state in this affair.
He clenched his fist and shook it towards the boat
Whose loss had left the *Gabriel* more remote;
For now the savages could not be chased,
And foes to be defeated must be faced.

Martin realizes savage trickery.

Suddenly, he saw his desperate plight
That would see them captives before night,
For men and boys he had all told thirteen
To stay the savage advance now foreseen.
Martin ordered canvas torn, and told
Each mariner to seek out every hold
A grasping savage hand would seek to reach
And nail the canvas firmly over the breach.
No sooner was the vessel thus prepared

Martin suddenly aware of their vulnerability...

... prepares *Gabriel* for attack.

When a swarm of savage boats advancing dared
Come close alongside the *Gabriel* to size
The splendour of their now undoubted prize,
While others from the shore with courage came
To join their brethren and enjoy the game.

Savages approach.

The captain gave out orders to the crew
Who lined up on the deck though they were few —
Defiant — while their captain, in surprise,
Presented the *Gabriel's* cannon to savage eyes.
This sight brought cries from which, with fears anew,
The savages changed heart and then withdrew
To reassemble and to counsel long
And then send forth a member of their throng
Who, seeing Martin's men withdraw from sight,
Gave every sign he had not come to fight;
His gestures, which the captain quickly guessed,
Invited them ashore to take their rest.

Martin stands firm.

Now the captain put in force a plan
To take as hostage this bold savage man.
Showing every sign that all was well
He offered him a tiny tinkling bell;
And just as any man might reach for gold
The savage was enticed to be more bold
While the captain, feigning error in his toss,
Dropped short the bell; the savage, suffering loss,
Could scarce contain his torment when he heard
The singing bell which Martin now proffered,
And reaching for his heart's desire, missed —
As Martin dropped the bell and grabbed his wrist,
Then leaning over, crouching on one knee,
Plucked savage, boat, and all out of the sea.

Martin tempts savage with bell . . .

. . . and captures him.

No sooner was his capture understood
Than the savage spat out a stream of blood,
Raging at his capture, fighting in vain,
Clenching his teeth, and severing his tongue in twain.

Savage bites tongue in half.

His fellows, so distressed to see him caught,
Raised their arms in horror; thus distraught
They circled round and chanted out their cries — Savages depart . . .
Like wolves, and left, howling to the skies.
Yet strange though this withdrawal seemed it was
No stranger than the still and empty pause
When birds wheeled and waves hissed on the shore
That, harbouring the enemy before,
And now abandoned — open to plain view — . . . leaving abandoned shore.
Proclaimed the loss of five of *Gabriel's* crew
Whom Martin was unwilling to forsake,
So dearly had they paid for their mistake.
(All the while his mind was plagued by ghosts — Martin recalls his own earlier imprisonment in Guinea.
Of men and boys imprisoned on the coasts
Of Guinea, in that scorched and torrid zone
Where life on earth becomes a hell — alone;
Where every day demands renewed belief
And every ship brings promise of relief)
Aye, Martin knew his comrades' inmost thought
If struggling life within them bravely fought.

His heart and duty one he hoisted sail
And, standing like a statue at the rail,
Passed back and forth along the misty shore
To help his missing comrades' hope restore:
Through trumpet sounds and gun shots they might hear
And feel their captain's presence very near. — Martin coasts about, waiting.
But never came the sign for which he yearned
And Martin saw his plan was overturned:
No longer were his comrades in his range,
No longer could he hope for their exchange.

Now there came the fall of the soft snow
That chills the sailor more than winds that blow, — Snow begins falling . . .
For through it he can neither hear nor see
And thus his life is placed in jeopardy.
Inch by inch the blanket thickened white

While overhead there shone a watery light
Which dulled their minds and damped their spirits more
As empty lay the land along the shore.
With keen eyes Martin looked upon his men —
Of which, excepting boys, he had but ten —
And saw that they were weakened by disease
Which worsened as their limbs began to freeze,
While in their bones a weariness prevailed;
And even though no man had ever failed
To stand his watch or ever give his best
Each yearned for lighter burden and sweet rest.

. . . and Martin realizes sorry state of crew.

As Martin paced the deck, and down below,
He slowly drank the *Gabriel's* bitter woe;
Folly it would be to test the strait
To west, his crew in such a sorry state;
Yet neither could he stay and winter here
Now the seasons galloped through the year.
Reflecting, he took Master Hall aside
And sought his sound opinion as a guide
With which the thoughts of others he combined,
And saw that where he asked he there did find
The counsel — nay, the wish — to set the sail
And quit a scene so desolate and pale.
This he resolved and bid the anchor weighed
Not to see departure more delayed
Than any man would want, or could withstand,
So far from home in this forsaken land.

Martin listens to counsel and decides to leave.

Her canvas hanging limp the *Gabriel* stole
Back along the strait, while each bell toll
Measured out their passage past the shore
Which they had thought to welcome them before;
But now each cliff and beach stood off remote,
A frigid host, and watched the *Gabriel* float
In silence through the fog until they reached
An island where the captain safely beached

Gabriel sails back along strait.

The ship and sent sailors on a mission,
Bidding them take tokens of possession
As evidence that they had lately been
To claim this land for their exalted Queen.
Each man on shore now sought a souvenir,
But cast a wary eye about for fear
He should encounter savage eyes with his,
Or hear a quick and deadly arrow whiz
Behind him from a place where crouched, unseen,
A figure bent upon his death so keen.
Quickly did the sailors scout the ground
And hasten back with all that they had found:
Living or dead, composed of stone or stock,
A blade of grass, a flower, a piece of rock;
Not any thing of value, so it seemed,
And less than Martin Frobisher had dreamed.

Gabriel beached and crew sent ashore for tokens.

Tokens taken apprehensively.

No man set much store by what he took,
And none but Martin turned around to look
When out to sea they headed — course due east —
And every sailor secretly released
Excitement to be leaving under sail.
(While Captain Martin stood behind the rail
And, staring far beyond the swaying mast,
Recalled the sacrifice of journeys past
When all his youthful energy could boast
Of daring exploits off the Guinea coast;
And how, of forty and one hundred men,
One hundred never sailed for home again)
On this his mind played painfully until
The *Gabriel* left the fog and set his will
On changing weather, hourly growing worse,
As though the old sea witch had cast a curse
On all his crew, so burdened with fatigue
That every yard they fought seemed like a league.

Gabriel leaves mainland.

Martin recalls losses of earlier voyages.

Yet every man stuck sternly by his task

Gabriel encounters heavy weather.

And turned his back upon the icy blast
That taxed his strength and froze his fingers numb,
And lashed about his face and struck him dumb
Until he'd stood his watch and went below
Not once to complain, nor ever show
His sorry state, so weakened by disease — Hardship aboard.
That nightly would his shivering body seize
And wake him like a heap of stiffened bones
Haunted by the ghost of Davey Jones.
Day by day the *Gabriel* bravely fought
The stormy wind that pulled the braces taut,
That strained her masts and stretched the canvas tight,
Howling round the ship with awful fright
To keep her heeled atop the heaving seas
That threw each wave cascading round the knees
Of every man on deck, who bravely stood
And held his place despite the swirling flood.

Beneath the dark-browed sky the sea grew green
With evil, frenzied, till the ship's careen
Betrayed itself as madness round the lips
Of every frothing wave that, rearing, slips
The deck down slopes, racing though the bowels,
Plunging sleeping timbers, stirring growls
A hound will make when any strangers stalk
Unseen, yet close enough to quiet talk.
The storm raged ceaselessly till men could see
Their plight as penance; a sign could it be?
Who could say, when on one furious morn
As there the coast of Greenland broke the dawn — Greenland sighted.
An eerie siren's call was heard from land
That caused a sailor slack his gripping hand
And feel the waiting sea swell round his waist
To sweep his body over the deck in haste.
This Martin saw and urged the man hold on, — Sailor washed overboard . . .
But reached too late for now the man was gone.

Yet Martin stayed for destiny decreed
That he must share a miracle indeed. . .
High upon the wave that bore him out
The sailor, seeing Martin, gave a shout:
"God have mercy," desperately he cried, . . . and saved by Martin.
The wave smashing back against the side
Where Martin, reaching further than he dare,
Clutched the drowning hand that clutched the air,
And summoning his strength from deep within
Hauled the man to safety once again.

Such courage filled the crew with new resolve; Crew heartened once more . . .
Their hardship barely felt, their pain dissolved,
Their spirits high, they taught the wind to sing,
And scorned the waves so lately menacing.
The *Gabriel* pitched and heaved in headlong dash
That sped her homeward just as though the lash
Had whipped her to the peak of such great pace,
And spurred her toward the finish of the race
Which brought her out for many thousand miles . . . as *Gabriel* plunges on . . .
But saw her now once more off Orkney Isles
Headed south to reach the Scottish line . . . to Britain.
And soon to pass the ships that leave the Tyne,
As Martin had when once he carried coal,
Before he reached his great — nay, fabulous — goal
And drew new charts far beyond the realm
To which he now returned; and by the helm
Stood silently as up the Thames they sailed
Until the guardships spotted them and hailed:
"Which ship are you — and whence are bound?"
That brought the answer forth which did astound. Martin sails up Thames.
"The *Gabriel* and to London new returned,"
The message came, and London River burned
As news of their arrival flashed ahead
And townsfolk, long believing they were dead,
Stood along the banks to watch and wave

As Martin paused and with his cannon gave
Salute to sport his triumph and his pride
Which, now proclaimed, he sailed up with the tide
To London where, with all her bunting gay,
The *Gabriel* furled her sails and nudged the quay. . . . and docks.

News of their return raced through the streets
And, just as though a drum was sounding beats, Curiosity aroused, especially by savage.
Brought visitors to see their ship and hear
Tales of great adventure when death was near;
To see the fur clad savage whose sad eyes
Met many more that stared mesmerised
By such a private joke on public view:
He sat, alone, his swollen tongue in two,
Living a few short days for all to see,
The victim of his own rapacity.

But Master Lock was first to step aboard Lock comes on board . . .
As owner glad to see his ship restored,
And bring exciting news to Martin's ears
Of how the *Michael* filled the town with fears
One month before when, on his safe return, . . . tells of *Michael's* return.
Master Gryffyn forced their minds to burn
With tales which, if any were believed,
Meant mortal loss, a loss Lock deeply grieved;
But Gryffyn fled and played his sailors false
While Martin had proved worthy of his salts.
Joyful, Lock and Frobisher embraced
While Martin told of dangers they had faced; Martin announces discovery and gives black rock to Lock.
Of how the route to Cathay had been found
And how his men for tokens searched around
To pick some grass, a flower and a rock
Which last he gladly gave to Master Lock
Who rolled the smooth black stone around his hand,
A tribute from a new discovered land,
But never did suspect that it would hold
One reluctant speck of precious gold

Which, once discovered, set his mind on fire,
Playing on man's natural desire
For wealth untold; he then would speculate:
If this was in his grasp, Cathay could wait.

Young Lock left the *Gabriel*, safely home, — Lock quits *Gabriel* . . .
While Martin's mind still sailed upon the foam,
Standing at the rail in heavy seas,
Or facing cliffs of ice that chill the breeze;
And buoyed by his destiny that fate
Had placed across his bow the new found strait
Whose length he'd scanned and where his prospect told — . . . leaving Martin reflecting on journey.
That there the Western Sea Gate must unfold
To open up the globe: what would it pay?
The Moluccas, and the fabulous Cathay!

With such a voyage Martin now knew fame, — Martin becomes famous . . .
For many men began to speak his name;
And many more told how a small black stone
When flattered by an assayer had shown
An Eldorado lay within the grip — . . . as gold is found in black rock . . .
Of captains brave enough to take their ship.
But Martin paid this fever little heed
And knew it less of substance than of greed;
No different, he thought, than that displayed
By savage hands, now dead, or those that preyed
Upon his crew that had escaped alive — — . . . but his missing crew haunt him . . .
All, that is, except the fateful five
Whose spirits seemed to haunt him even now.
To sail again and seek them he must vow. — . . . to return.
Thus thinking, with his mind so brisk and keen,
He went ashore to see his gracious Queen.

HENRY HUDSON, HIS JUDGEMENT

In chill grey mists on London's river bank
An ancient castle holds within its walls
Those luckless men whom fate has cast aside.
Down darkened passages the jailer shifts
His feet, measuring off the hours each day,
Taking to each wretch his daily bread
And coming back to look among the crumbs.
Here lie convicted murderers and thieves
Whose fate awaits them now within the hour,
While others bear the wait of days of trial
That holds them fast till judgement has been passed.
In one large cell beneath the reach of day
Where even moss eschews the dripping wall
Sits Abacuck Prickett, head between his knees,
Deeper in thought than he had ever been.
Mute and blank, he stares down at the earth
That lies between his feet, one foot apart:
A space that spans his universe of dirt
In time now cramped within the creeping hour.

Unaware of the wretched misery
That lies in human form about the walls,
His mind darts back and forth, while his eyes,
Set still, belie his unremitting search
Of every word that he must soon explain,
And every deed by which he will be judged.
"Lord, dear Lord," his silent lips beseech,
"Oh why did these events ensnare thy servant;
How could I, a humble serving footman,
Ever come to face this trial: I know
In thy great wisdom all these things must be,
Nor ever would I question that they should,
But in thy mercy show me if you will
How I must defend myself tomorrow
So that I might leave this place alive.
Beside me lies young Walsingham grown old

Through days of ruthless questioning which ring
His eyes with grey and sink them in his head,
As though his death were started in the dock
Where every day he stands to make his plea
On charges that tomorrow will face me!"

The sudden bolt shot back across the door
And yellow light sprang in to rule the dust.
A slouching silhouette looked round
And halted his eyes where misery was worst.
"Prickett," called the figure cut in black,
"Your time has come. Now you must face the Court
And I have come to take you there at once."
Abacuck Prickett raised his startled eyes
And formed his lips to ask: was it true?
Had no error been made in this summons?
Did not the schedule call for trial next day?
But at once he saw it was no error
And knew his trial wouldn't be delayed
Despite the fact that he was not prepared
And needed time to gather his defence.

The guard and Prickett threaded through the halls
And stairways leading upwards to the Court,
Their footsteps sending echoes on ahead
To herald their arrival at the door
Which yielded uncommanded on approach
To leave them on the threshold where it seemed
The guard dissolved and Prickett stood alone.
This vaulted chamber, scene of so much woe,
Now saw him ushered forth towards the dock
Where facing him his jury all sat grim
And solemn; now their duty was begun.
Wigged gentlemen and judges stroked their chins
Each whispering to the other, watching, till
The Lord Chief Justice cleared his throat to bring
A rain of silence hushing over the Court.

Then the sorry prisoner heard the charges:
"Through powers ordained, this Admiralty Court
Will now commence the trial of Abacuck Prickett.
Mutiny and piracy are charged;
Causing the death of Henry Hudson; and
Causing the death of nine among his crew.
Grave charges, Master Prickett, are they not?
To which you must now answer for your life.
I therefore caution you to speak with care
And tell the Prosecutor all you know."

"Master Prickett," the Prosecutor called,
"Pray describe this voyage north-by-west
Where Master Hudson and his son were lost.
I've heard it said the venture had to fail,
As any voyage ill-conceived must do.
What do you think of the preparations made:
Enough to serve their purpose would you say?
And tell us about your shipmates live and dead,
With whom your life is joined throughout this trial:
What say you of loyalty, and what of skill?
Take pains to tell us, prithee, if you will."

"If ever a man did want to lay his burden
Of truth before his countrymen to judge,
'Tis I my lord, for I do count this welcome
And gladly tell the Court this sorry tale,
Though I can scarce recall any moment
Without a sudden chill shivers my bones.
I am but a common man, and loyal,
These many years bound to Sir Dudley Diggs
In service and in gratitude; and this
I say that honest men will understand
The failings they may find in words and deed.
I was a humble haberdasher when
Sir Dudley set good fortune in my path
And offered me employment in his house

Where since I've lived and learned affairs of men.
'Twas there I first heard tell of rich Cathay
To which a shorter route must yet be found
And saw Sir Dudley entertain two friends,
Sir Thomas Smith and Master Wolstenhome,
Proposing an English ship should sail at once
To find and chart this passage to Cathay;
And Master Hudson must be captain because
No other man could chart as well as he.
Master Hudson, I judge by all accounts,
Was well disposed towards this bold new plan
Which, Sir Dudley informed me at the time,
Met with approval from the Prince of Wales.
There is no greater person, save the King,
To give assent to any worthy scheme,
And thus it was an honour rarely met
When I was asked to sign on with the crew.
Captain Weymouth's famous ship *Discovery*,
Which sailed uncharted icy seas before,
Became the scene of busy preparations
As Master Hudson hired on the crew:
Robert Jewitt, the master's mate before,
Was first to sign again, while on his heels
Came skillful Phillip Staffs, the carpenter,
And Michael Perse, that willing ox, and more
(Including young John Hudson, cabin boy);
Robert Billett, skilled in navigation,
Led the newly-signed to come aboard:
Bosun, Francis Clements; Bennett Mathews,
Cook; and honest quartermaster, John King;
Crusty William Wilson joined the deck hands
Andrew Motter, then John Thomas, and then —
Let me see — yes, Thomas Woodhouse,
A roving mathematician who . . ."
"Enough!

Enough!", the Prosecutor intervened,
Pray spare us further details from your list.
You paint a pretty picture do you not?
And bid the Court believe that all was well,
That nothing evil seemed about to brew.
But yet it did; of this there is no doubt.
Perhaps there was an omen caught your eye
Or yet some sign of discord in the crew
Which caused their minds to foment; or perforce
You claim it was some devil set your course."

"Oh no sir, God protected us always,
In answer to the prayers of every man.
Together we all assembled with the captain
To bow our heads and worship in the church,
St Ethelburga's shrine in Bishopsgate,
The eve of our departure, when our Prince
And great Archdeacon Hakluyt came to bless
Our venture, and to wish us all 'God speed.'
The morning saw the tide awake and slide
Us off the mud, happy on our way,
While gently waving hands kissed farewell
And figures on the dock slowly shrank.
Thoughts fond and sad perfused each inner ear,
The quay not many miles astern, when whispers
Spread among the crew the captain grew
Displeased to see the owners' man, Colburne,
Standing in the bow with folded arms,
Like a king surveying all before him.
And none of us gave one second's thought,
At Gravesend, when a quick young bucko climbed
On board to grasp the master's hand and stow
His gear on deck; nor were we aware
He held the master's favour, this Henry Greene,
Who came to take us all to Hell if we
Would follow. Not one moment did he lose

To place a worm in Master Hudson's ear:
Before the night had come and gone the master
Could not bear Colburne's presence further.
Near Sheppey the master set him back on shore,
And writ and placed a letter in his hand.
But let me, if it please you sir, describe
How perilous our journey was to be
So you may learn what fate befell the crew
And better judge the thoughts that filled our heads.

We left the realm and sailed with canvas filled
Due north past Flamborough Head to Orkney Isles,
And ran before a hearty breeze north west
To reach the hazy shore of Iceland cloaked
By weather foul and filled with evil smoke
That belched beyond Mount Hecla's sinister peak,
Remote and high above us yet so nigh
Its evil iced each heart. The ill that lies
Within this breath of hell could scarcely wait
Until the weather cleared before its spell
Compelled the surgeon and young Greene to go
Ashore and finish there with bloodied fists
The argument that words had failed to end.
Greene so beat the hide of this old sawbones,
Who suffered even more to feel the lash
Of Master Hudson's tongue, that half the crew
Were needed on the shore to coax the man
On board again; but not too soon for winds
Arose from nowhere, steadily growing to press
Us westward, plunging through a white-capped sea
That frothed and seethed as though in sympathy
With Master Hudson who, learning the mate,
Robert Jewitt, dishonourably played him false,
Fumed for full two days and nights with half
A mind to set him back on Iceland's shore.
These gusts, though quickly sprung, were quick to fade

And leave a steady breeze due west: beneath,
A rolling sea. Past great flocks of ice
We fled and sped towards the coast of Greenland
Where we searched for signs of beast or man,
But sought in vain for now the land was dead.
'Twas then the master told us how the Danes
Had reached this shore many hundred years
Before, a bishop in their midst, with stones
To build their villages. Long, long ago
They'd tilled the soil and tended herds of cattle;
In house and church had kept the laws their fathers
Kept. But then had come the raiders: thieves
And killers who snatched the children up and fled;
Or hissing to each other, would steal about
At night on devil's work. These *skrelingers*
Attacked each unprotected village and farm
Until it chanced they'd killed the Danes or made
Them flee to safety, leaving only graves
Behind — a warning, said the master, that we
Should keep our guard on any shore that lay
Between Cathay and here.

We took our leave
Of Greenland's barren coast and sailed for seven
Pensive nights in which I overheard
The master tell young John of youthful days
When he, with Captain Davis in this very
Sea, rode the Furious Overfall
That caught them in its pull and swept them off
As helpless as a leaf that leaves the bough
To join a swollen river rushing by.
This memory still fresh, the lookout cried:
'Land! To starboard.' The deck became alive
With men who scanned the line where sea meets sky
To catch a glimpse of this new land but soon
We slipped, just as every man had feared,

Within the western ocean's eastern race,
The Furious Overfall, that quickly swept
Our ship towards a whirling sea of ice,
White islands that encircled us and loomed
Around the vessel robed in mist, while we
Could scarce contain our fear they'd come too near
And tear a gaping hole along our side.
Our captain, watching the tide, set course due south
In heavy fog that took away our sight
But left the sound of growling all around,
Filling our hearts with terror as we strained
To see the passing ice before it gored
Our flanks, dispatching us all to watery graves.
For days we cast about that murky sea
When, suddenly, a wind blew off the fog
To clear our view and clarify our dread:
For now the icy islands rocked and heaved
About, restless in the boisterous wind,
And ganged around the ship, their jagged sides
Bristling with destruction, while some so drunk
And tilted fell beneath their weight and split;
The monstrous bodies collapsing in the sea
Sent swamping waves and spray cascading high.
In all our dread the master took his stand
Beside the helm which felt his steady hand
Until at last, exhausted, we hove to
Inside a giant scallop carved upon
The face of yet the greatest piece of ice
I ever saw. There we stayed held fast
Against the towering glassy wall, secure,
Slowly turning twice upon the hour
And slowly drifting on, I know not where,
For thereabouts the needle tells a lie."

"Stop there an instant, Prickett, if you please,
And with his lordship's pardon I'll remind

The Court of a voyage several years before
When Captain Weymouth sailed those very seas
And in that very ship faced just such ice.
If I recall correctly now, milord,
The captain faced a mutiny as well.
So tell us then dear Prickett, if you will:
Rebellion, did it spring from devils you saw?
Or is it, far from home, men flaunt the law?"

"Sir, I cannot say I did not feel
The presence of evil lurking on that sea;
Never had I seen such deadly perils
Or heard such growls and moans upon the wind;
Nor ever felt the cold embedded deep —
So deep it chilled the marrow of my bones.
Some there were who whispered their dissent
But whispered it beyond the master's ear;
They believed that he had lost his way
And we were all foredoomed. And so it seemed
For when the storm had ceased, and we cut loose,
The ship was forced to follow the shifting ice
Which sent us north, or east, or south, or west,
Praying for clear sea every day.
Despairing, Master Hudson brought his chart
And set it before our sailors who, he said,
Had passed by many leagues beyond the mark
Where any men had ever sailed before.
'Who's for sailing on then lads,' he asked,
'And who's for sailing home with nought to show?'
At this the men that Jewitt had unstrung,
By spreading about poisonous words and lies,
Spoke out to say that we should not proceed,
And wished themselves at home; and I recall
I heard their trumpet Francis Clements, the bosun,
Say that if he owned one hundred pounds
Four score and ten he'd give to be back home.

Whereupon the carpenter, Phillip Staffs,
Declared that if he had that very sum
He would not think it worth paying ten
To be at home just then. In all this talk
The master kept the helm, and finding room
Escaped the icy pack and set a course
That none of us could fathom; yet the Lord
Determined he should drive us straight towards
The Furious Overfall which swept us up
And carried us off, a scrap of tinder wood
Unable to resist its headlong rush.
This held us till the coast ran south, to where
The cape now called the Cape of Wolstenholme
Is found; and off the shore a league, Diggs Isle.
Anchored here, the master looked aloft,
Watched the lightning streak across the sky
And turned to catch my eye: 'Take the boat
Ashore,' he said, 'Mount the island's peak
And survey out to sea — seek about.'
Phillip Staffs and I rowed off beneath
A darkened sky wondering what we'd find,
While pouring through our minds the ceaseless rain
Splashed and spattered against the swilling bilge
Yet once the prow struck hard against the shore
The pouring stopped, the clouds were blown away,
And Staffs and I jumped lightly out across
The rocks to climb the hill and look about.
For hungry hours we stalked a herd of deer
But never nigh enough for musket shot;
And came upon some stones in rounded heaps,
The work of Christian men I thought, but found,
To my surprise, they were hollow and full
With many fowl hanging by their necks.

Just then the captain fired off a gun
To summon us on board and warn us both

Approaching fog would cut us off. Inside
His cabin I described the fowl that might
Be had for our refreshment if we stayed
A day or two, but he would not hear tell
Of anything creating a moment's delay,
And feeling on his cheek the northern wind,
Set sail — and sailed at last to reach his dream:
For soon the land fell off to either side
And there before him stood the western sea,
The full horizon sharp around the ship,
Just as the chart of Doctor Lock had shown.
The master stood as though transfixed and gazed
Upon this beautiful sight, while men sang out
And Staffs and I clasped hands and jigged about
Like red-faced schoolboys playing at the fair.
Cathay within our reach, each man began
To count his riches and his pleasures too
When once, at journey's end, we came to rest.

Our spirits high we sailed for thirty days
Due south, exploring as we went until
The land at last curved round ahead to catch
Our ship inside a bay. The moment came
Which Jewitt patiently had waited for.
He stole about below the deck and spread
His sour word: we were lost and here
Was proof, the captain no better than an ant,
Who finding that his path is blocked will try
Again, blindly this way, blundering that . . .
Till Master Hudson could not bear it more
And brought the mate to trial before the crew.
On the deck the men assembled still
And quiet till the master recounted lies
And slanderous words off Iceland: how the mate
Had been disloyal when our lives were threatened
By the ice — which Jewitt could scarce deny.

Every man now spoke against the mate,
Openly despising his evil tongue
With such a cry the master took him down,
Making Robert Billett mate instead.
I pray you will not ask me why the bosun,
Clements, was replaced by William Wilson
Whose wickedness was plain for all to see.

Changed about, back we went to our search,
Sailing north, then south, then north again.
I knew not where we were till Michaelmas
Which found us safely anchored as the wind
Swept violently across the bay. Each day
That followed, Master Hudson paced the deck
Impatient to be gone, though none were keen
To follow him, save John. Eight days were passed
When at last his patience reached its end;
Shunning all our pleas he bid us weigh
The anchor. We obeyed, and bent our backs
To wheel the capstan till the cable, taut —
As though it had been caught by Neptune — sprang
So strong upon the swell it spun the capstan
Backwards fast and cast us on the deck
With heavy blows; but Phillip Staffs, his axe
Above his head, chopped the cable through
To save its length from loss. The master freed,
He set our bow towards the south again
And steered us through a sea half black, half white,
Until we reached the shore. There we sent
The boat to pick its way through broken rocks
That lay submerged, spilling tender feet
To scramble through the hissing foam. But yet
Within the hour they hastened back to tell
Us what they'd seen: cast in soft black earth,
The footprint of a man — which set us all
To wondering what the sign could mean, till dark,

When off we sailed to search further east
In hope we'd find a winter harbour there . . ."

The Prosecutor stared with widening eyes
And quickly raised his arm to call a halt.
"You mean to say," he said with hands on hips,
"No passage south was found in all this search?
Then why did Master Hudson not return
But choose instead a barren winter home
Where none would know his whereabouts or needs?
I put to you the question plain and clear:
Was Master Hudson forced to act through fear?"

"Master Hudson, sir, feared only God,
And never shrank from duty that I saw,
But always weighed his prospects with his plans
As carefully as a man would weigh his gold;
More careful yet for souls were in his charge,
A charge he looked upon as sacred trust.
Yet he knew well the chart of Doctor Lock
Which showed the very sea that he had found
And thus was sure that somewhere down that coast
There lay a hidden passage south or west.
Though this proved false it was the wiser course,
For though we stored provisions for return
We would have perished, locked within the ice,
Whose presence in our minds served even then
To hasten us in finishing our search.

The snow began to fall, and Phillip Staffs
And I were sent ashore to mark a sheltered
Beach where we could bring the ship and haul
Her fast aground, safe above the tide.
This done, in days no more than I could count
On both my hands, the weather changed and filled
The bay with ice — which caused me to reflect
Upon the scene, and wonder if the men
Would all survive the winter months ahead.

The captain, watchful, bid us go afield
To hunt in pairs, and never singly, lest
Anyone be taken unawares by men
That lived upon that land. And bountiful
The land and waters were, for our dear Lord
In all his mercy sent the fish to fill
Our nets to brimming every single day,
While all around us marched, as white as milk,
One thousand partridges without a fear
Of muskets.

Now the cold advanced with stealth
And brought a razor wind to cut our hands,
Keeping us near the ship for fear we froze.
Deeper each day the biting pain began
To penetrate our flesh. At last it pierced
Our gunner, poor John Williams whom it killed,
And so started a scandal that has dogged
Us ever since — God forgive our master's
Uncharitable dealing with this man.
But you must have the truth of these events
Milord, and first should understand young Greene
Had stayed awhile beneath the master's roof;
And though his life was lewd, and foul his tongue,
He wrote well, and the master would insist
On having him to sea (without pay)
In hopes the journey might remould his life.
But Robert Jewitt, when he was drunk, let slip
A different tale: 'twas his firm belief
The master brought young Greene aboard to spy
And take back to him all that might be used
To denigrate a man who made complaint;
Which angered Master Hudson who would say
Henry Greene, save for religion, was like
Clean paper whereupon a man might write.
Now long the custom of the sea has been

To bring the belongings of a man now dead
Before the mainmast where they always sell
To him who offers most. And Williams owned
A grey cloth gown of such great warmth that Greene
Had set his heart upon it, going straight
To ask the master if it might be his;
Through fortune's twist the master said it would,
And told each man who wished to make a bid
That he could not; and there the matter stood.
While shortly after, when the ground had froze,
And ice had reached within our very bones,
He ordered Phillip Staffs to build a house
Which, in warmer weather, he'd refused.
But Staffs declined and said the snow and ice
Were such he neither could, nor would, start work —
At which the master flew into a rage
And quickly came below to ferret him out
His cabin, shouting a threat to have him hanged.
But worse, when Staffs went off to hunt next day
He took young Greene to partner him, which proved
Offensive to Master Hudson who then gave
The gunner's gown to Billett, our new mate,
And railed against young Greene in slanderous words
Disgracing him, and breaking off his pledge.
Now you shall see how evil came from this;
For Greene no longer owned the master's trust
And sought in every way to bring him harm.

Those many months we steeped in cruel cold,
Too weary and too sore to go abroad;
Our blackened gums grew rotten round our teeth
While swollen joints were locked in every limb.
At night, the mercy of the shrinking day
Became an endless dark which hid each smile
Beneath its gloom and left its only solace,
Sleep, to lift the burden from our minds,

To sweetly soften every nagging pain
And take us fondly home: to babe and wife
In happy comfort playing by the fire,
Poking up the laughing flames; to eyes
Like pale blue silk, apple cheeks, and hands
As gentle as a feather's touch. Sweet dreams
That crumbled every morning, every day
That summoned, like the jailer's rattling keys,
The stiffened bodies back to face the ice.

When winter's iron hand released its grip
It left the crew in such a feeble state.
We scarce could shoot, and all the birds that came
(Like ducks and geese) took flight before we aimed,
Leaving us so desperately needing food
We searched among the rocks for frogs and moss;
And which anon we ate, though not with joy,
For never could I stomach loathsome slime
Nor ever relish dust sawn from a post.
Our hunger pierced with pain begot despair
As endless weeks stretched on without relief
Till God was pleased to show Thomas Woodhouse,
The mathematician, buds of turpentine
Which in the surgeon's hands became a brew,
A drink more welcome than the buds of May
That stir an old man's bones and thoughts beside;
The residue, so gently he applied
To swollen joints as salve to soothe away
Our aches and bring such ease and happiness
That pain-creased faces learned again to smile.

This mercy plucked us all from hideous death
But left our minds infected with the thought
Each man, though destined to survive disease,
Was doomed to starve — when suddenly I heard
A cry ring out not far from the ship
Where, by the cracking ice, the men had found

A savage boldly come to see what kind
Of men we were. This quick commotion brought
The master forth to quieten the crew
Whose jests the savage knew were aimed at him;
But Master Hudson showed him every sign
That he was safe, and gave to him a knife,
A looking glass and buttons which he took,
Right thankfully, and made us signs to show
That on the morrow he would come again.
And when he did, and spread before us furs
In trade for gifts that he'd received, our minds
Were soon engaged by thoughts of flesh which once
Had lain alive beneath these skins; fresh meat
Obsessed our brains as eagerly we watched
The master trade, but watched in vain: he would
Insist on more than this bold savage would give,
And so the bartering suddenly stopped short,
To end our hopes of food.

Our savage took
His leave, and neither he nor we believed
His promise to return. The lengthening days
Prolonged the hours of misery awake
But brought the welcome thaw which freed the shore
Of ice and saw us launch the boat to fish.
Seven men cast out the net and hauled
It in with such a shout: 'Praise the Lord!'
Five hundred fish in just one day they caught;
Some as big as herring, some like trout.
Our famine ended, all we did was feast
And fish, too happy relishing relief to see
The catch each day was smaller than the catch
The day before; and none was set in store.

All the while, William Wilson and Greene
Watched the shallop being rigged by Phillip Staffs,
And planned to take it secretly and flee;

But this deceitful scheme soon went awry
When Master Hudson himself sailed away
To reach the tribes that lived along the coast.
Eight days we waited anxiously before
He came with empty hands and vanquished eyes
To tell us how the savages, on sight,
Had set the woods on fire to drive him off.
Now returned without the promised meat
He'd hoped the savages would give in trade,
And seeing the crew were nought but bone in skin,
He took out from the bread room all there was,
Assembled us without another word,
And wept as he gave every man his share.
But he was so angered that Robert Billett
Had given the men free rein while he was gone
That in his stead he made John King the mate
And added more to the store of discontent
Which lay within those men so sick and lame.
Soon the ice departed from the bay
As warmer weather promised better days . . ."

"And tell me," came the Prosecutor's cry,
"Were maladies quick melted by this thaw,
And spirits once again restored with joy?
Or did these memories fester in the mind
To harden hearts against your captain? Speak!
What fate befell the master and the crew —
And tell us every deed performed by you."

"There was no spring of spirits blossomed forth
To gladden hearts or bid us all rejoice;
Only nature's welcome restoration
Loosening the land and freeing our ship to sail
Just as we pleased: to reach the rich Cathay,
To stand for home, or stay and search for food.
The twelfth of June, our anchor weighed at last,
The sails were hoisted to put us under way

Before the setting sun could dip its fire
Beneath the silhouette of rock, the last
We saw for many a day, when far from shore
Hungry bellies once again held sway,
Clamouring for food though little lay in store.
The crew believed nine cheeses still remained
But heard the master say there were but five;
While he, behind the crew's turned back, had sent
A cabin boy to search through all our chests,
Discovering thirty cakes of hidden bread:
Suspicion flared through every troubled mind;
The rotting cheese and mouldy bread devoured
Made sick men worse, while former friendships soured.

The one and twentieth day of June, at night,
Young Greene and William Wilson came to see
Me where I was lying lame across my bunk,
And told me they would shortly take the crew
In charge, and let the master and the sick
Fend for themselves; there were, according to them,
But fourteen days of victuals left for all,
While Master Hudson did not give a care
That none of them had eaten now for days.
'Twas plain to see these angry men despaired
To mend or end their misery, and they
Determined they'd resolve it now — or die.
'But you have wives and children,' whispered I,
'For whose sake you should not commit a deed
So foul in the sight of God and man, for which
You surely would be banished from your home!'
'Hold your peace', hissed Henry Greene, 'The worst,
I know, is I'll be hanged when I reach home;
But I would rather hang at home than starve
Abroad; the ending is the same to me.'

I thanked them both for giving me their trust
And bid them let the will of God be done;

I had not joined the ship to forsake her now
And could not hurt my brethren by such deeds.
Away went Henry Greene in such a rage,
Swearing to cut the throat of any man
Who stood across his path, but in an hour
Returned to see if Wilson had prevailed
On me to join their ranks; but he had not.
'Delay three days,' I said, 'and give me time
To have the master make it well,' but Greene
Said no, and so I asked for but two days —
Nay only twelve more hours; but he declined.
I was then forced to tell them I believed
They did not care for any man on board,
But sought revenge and Master Hudson's blood;
Why else would they be moving in the night?
At this young Greene sprang up and placed his hand
Upon my bible and, with graven face,
Swore he meant no harm to any man
And would not run this course save for the good
Of all; and all should rise and swear the same.
And this they did, binding each to the next
By oath which, with regret, I devised:
You shall swear to God, your Prince and Country,
You shall do no thing, or harm no man,
Save for the good of all and God's glory!
First Wilson swore, then Jewitt, Michael Perse,
Andrew Motter, John Thomas, and then the cook,
Bennett Mathews, whose signal we would use.

I begged young Greene again to wait till dawn
(In hopes that word might spread among the crew,
And thus alert those poor innocent souls
Whose destiny now lay in shifting hands).
'Who will you cast out?', I said to Greene,
To which the answer came: 'Phillip Staffs, John King,
And every man too sick to move: the sick

We cannot help, nor yet can we sustain;
The others betrayed their mates so they could gain
The master's favour. King can neither read
Nor write, which befits the master's purpose
Not the mate: King can see the charts
But cannot tell the master's secret plans.'
Few could sleep in peace that fateful night,
With Henry Greene watching the master's door
Until the first sharp ray of light awoke
The cook who took up his duties with ample noise,
Filling his kettle and thereby sending the flare
That signalled the start of actions all would regret.

John King arose, went into the hold,
And heard the hatch slam down to shut him in;
While Greene detained the carpenter with talk
Until the cook raised the master from sleep
And drew him out of his cabin, on pretence,
To face both cook and Thomas, unaware
That Wilson crept behind to pin his arms.
From where I lay below the deck I heard
A noisy scuffle and caught the master's demand
To hear their purpose. 'Soon enough you'll know,'
Came the reply as they marched him out on deck,
'When you're in the shallop with the rest.'

The stamp of feet upon the deck rushed back
And forth, broken now and then by cries
Of protest. I heard the master call for Staffs —
And listened — but the answer never came;
And watched as Jewitt slipped below, his eyes
Glinting, to fetch John King out of the hold.
He slid the bolt, and watched the hatch fly back
As King emerged, a cutlass raised aloft,
Slashing at Jewitt, and bent upon his life —
Which would have been lost had not three cohorts come
To overpower King and bind his hands.

One by one the sick, despite their pleas,
Were dragged on deck and forced to wait their turn
To drop into the shallop's crowded bilge,
Where some lay still and silent, waiting death,
And others tried to clamber back in fear,
Promising gold — desperate — but all refused.
Again the master called, but now to me,
And I, propped upon my worthless limbs,
Came on deck to speak, and begged them all
For love of God — falling on my knees —
To do to others as they would be done unto.
The master was denied the right to speak
And I was told to hold my peace and go
Below, while Master Hudson, once aboard
The shallop, called me to the window grill
And shouted: 'Jewitt will overthrow us all'.
'Nay,' said I, 'This is the doing of Greene,'
Which after I had said it made me fear,
For well I know Henry Greene could hear.

In all of this confusion Phillip Staffs
Kept his head, proclaiming his contempt;
He would not stay on board, as I had hoped,
But warned the rebels if he was detained
He'd leap upon the first large piece of ice
The ship passed by. Hearing the man declare
Profound devotion to the master made
My grief the worse, for Staffs I called a friend.
Now he came alone, to take his leave
With tears through which we both made solemn pledge
That he who was the first to reach Diggs Isle
Would leave the other signs. With this we broke
Our clasp and Staffs then left, the last to take
His place aboard the brimming shallop. Off
It drifted far astern until the line,
That slender cord that held our vessels fast,

Rose slowly out of the sea, dripping wet
And tugging, awaiting the anxious blade which cut
It off, casting nine brave souls adrift
And sending us, our topsails shook and full,
Springing towards the distant eastern shore.

The master gone, men raced about the deck,
Pillaging stores and rifling every chest
That could be found, their desperate cries like those
Of men who seek to shake a curse but fail.
They took their banished mates' belongings just
As though the men were dead, and would not heed
My pleas for clemency. Fired by revenge,
The frenzy loosed each sailor's wits and drove
His wild and restless eyes upon an endless
Search, which suddenly was stopped in disbelief —
Nay, I say in terror — to see again
The shallop coming near. A panic burst
Among the crew and sent them up aloft,
Scrambling through the rigging, shaking loose
The sails and hoisting every other inch
Of canvas they could lay to hand. We fled
As though an enemy pursued, and ran
Until we reached the eastern shore — alone —
Nor ever saw that fated shallop more."

"Stop there, Master Prickett, with what you've said
And kindly tell us all why we should take
Your words as truth when blood-hard clothes lie here
That once lay round the backs of sturdy men
Who cannot hear your talk, for they are dead!
Look at the garments closely then recall:
Are these the clothes your shipmates wore; if so,
How came they thus without a single blow?"

"Aye, sir, these garments were, I must confess,
The property of shipmates now all dead;
But were they with us here, and could they speak,

I vow they would not change a word I said —
Or will say now if by your leave I may
Recount our desperate search to find Diggs Isle
Where I had seen a store of fowl and knew
That many more bred thereabouts. We ran
Along this eastern coast with haste and knew
We had to reach the Isle or starve to death;
For all we found ashore was cockle grass
To suit the taste of absent quadrupeds,
But this we gladly ate to stay our pains.
For days and nights — so many I scarce recall —
Henry Greene would have me move my gear
To Master Hudson's cabin: this, he claimed
Was willed by all the men — which I did doubt —
And said it should be Jewitt; but Greene would not
Hear tell of this, confessing he could not trust
The man with Master Hudson's charts. So up
We went where Greene laid out the finest things
The master had possessed; and opening up
The chest, gave me the key — which made me reflect:
What could his purpose be? For weeks we hugged
The coast while Greene worked busily to show
Me as a thief by leaving with me bread
And treasured things which then he would proclaim
Were stolen. Praise the Lord that some aboard
Refused their ear, and would not see me set
Ashore, deserted, facing a certain death.

Though Greene held sway, the helm was in the hands
Of Billett, while Jewitt stayed aside and cursed
The course, claiming we must be too far north.
Such words sent waves of fear throughout the men
Who soon believed the way was truly lost,
But Billett would not hear their doubtful views
And kept a steady helm, as we had come.
Cockle grass ashore and cockle grass

For fodder turned the ship into a barn
Which saw and heard the lowly low, till high
Above the rocky shore there rose a flock
Of birds — the very same we'd seen a year
Before. The men jumped up to see Diggs Isle,
And cheered as we came sailing through the strait,
Our muskets raised to celebrate and bag
Three dozen gulls we hungrily stuffed in our mouths.
Content that night, the light of dawn was sharp
To tell us we must take the boat and search
The cliffs for birds and eggs. Imagine our
Surprise when round the point there came a flock
Of boats which, seeing us, drew close together,
Creeping up towards us. Savage crews
Made signs of friendship; we in turn made signs
They need not fear, and gave to them and they
To us a man, to learn each other's ways.
Climbing back on board the ship we all
Rejoiced at finding in this wilderness a tribe
Of simple savages who could attend
Our every need if we would simply go
Ashore next day — which came too soon, for I,
Still lame, had to tend the boat while all
The rest, impatient to be gone, swore
At each delay.

But soon upon our way,
We rowed with zeal until the ship had dropped
From sight around the point, and saw ahead
The savages were dancing on the beach,
Waving as we spilled out of the boat,
Trinkets handy, a sparkle in each eye;
But I, through lameness, had to be content
To watch the boat. This busy scene brought forth
A savage who waded out and would have climbed
Aboard had I not stood and waved my hands

To show that he should go away but he,
Pretending that he did not understand,
Stood waiting till I pointed towards the shore
When slowly he started to move (though all the while
His face was turned towards me). I sat down,
And yet no sooner seated than I saw
Beside me in the boat a human foot,
Whereupon I turned my head to see
A savage with his knife gripped overhead
And quickly raised my arm to stop the blow
Which struck me deep in the breast, and then again
Thrust deep into my thigh and almost cut
A finger off my hand, which now stayed his
While I reached back to grab him by the sleeve
And pull him past my shoulder onto my knee,
Pinning both his arms against his side
And freeing my bleeding hand. My wits restored,
My dagger, which I had forgotten about,
Came suddenly to mind, and when in hand
I thrust it deep into his side and through his throat.
As my attacker slumped down at my feet,
I saw the same dark treachery on shore
Where I knew our men had no weapons:
William Wilson and Thomas fended off
The slashing knives that cut their bowels, as Greene
And Michael Perse came tumbling back on board
To cut us free; Andrew Motter leaped
Across the foam towards us, scrambling till
His hand clutched the stern where Michael Perse
Heaved him up and, looking round, snatched
A hatchet from a savage whom he slew
With one enormous blow, staining the sea
With crimson evidence; Henry Greene,
Though gashed by savage blades, found a stick
And flailed it about their heads as there he stood

Crying, 'Coragio! Coragio!'
Mighty Perse held others at bay until
We edged the boat beyond the savage pack,
But when the last had climbed aboard, a flight
Of arrows rained upon us, bringing one
That pierced the heart of Henry Greene, to kill,
While Michael Perse and I received such wounds
That we could barely serve our turn; yet he,
Great ox, and Andrew Motter, rowed us off —
Though still in constant jeopardy because
We could not see our ship, nor they see us,
Until we'd rowed some distance out from shore.

I feared the savages would launch their boats
Yet, God protecting, this they did not do,
And so we kept on rowing till Michael Perse
Leaned across his oar and then collapsed.
Andrew Motter stood and called 'Halloo!',
And desperately waved his arms; yet none on board
The ship could see the danger we were in
Nor knew just what we meant. But in the end
They sailed across and took us all on board.
Henry Greene was dropped into the sea
And shortly after, Thomas gave up life,
While William Wilson ended his days cursing
In such a fearful manner. In two more days
Big Michael Perse was dead. These things, milord,
I have described at length to show the blood
That stains this ragged shirt I hold came not
From any quarrel fought among our men;
And though my wounds are not a pretty sight
I willingly would show them to the Court."

The Prosecutor slowly left his chair
And grimly looked in Abacuck Prickett's eyes.
"We've heard you speak when murder was the charge.
What say you to the charge of piracy?

And what to plundering stores in Newfoundland?
Or tell us, if your memory's not too dim,
How otherwise you reached the Thames again;
That pirates will be hanged, you understand,
If ever they set foot upon this land."

"It grieves me, sir, to hear you make that charge
For well I know the penalty is death;
And this I did explain at pains to those
Who tried to lead us all to doom, and would
Have done so if young Greene had got his way,
For he had sworn that he would not return
Until he gained safe passage from the King.
But Greene was dead and we were few and weak,
With only Jewitt tempting us to stand
For Newfoundland and quick relief. This course
We shunned and summoning our strength we left
That rocky coast to reach for Greenland's shore
And then, God willing, stretch beyond for home.
In the store were just one hundred fowl,
A sack of meal, and no food more; and not
A place upon the chart where we could call
And still escape another winter stay
Which every man on board knew all too well
Would finish us. Our minds alive with doubt,
Our lips in prayer, we watched the coastline drop
Astern. The men took on the duties now
Of two but ate the meals of less than one:
A bowl of pottage and half a fowl each day;
No more before the morrow, even though
Each night our bellies bid our lips betray
The agony within. Both day and night
Robert Jewitt continued his sour song
And would have had us bring the ship about
Had we not stood behind Robert Billett,
Now the master.

We prayed we'd reach the coast
Of Ireland before the hand of death reached us.
But willing winds weren't always at our back,
And few of us had strength to hold the helm;
Our course was like a wandering drunken tar's,
And left the master doubtful with his chart.
Robert Jewitt spoke up to make the claim
We'd run up north too far, and long since passed
The coast of Ireland and of Scotland too,
But he was soon to die of direst want
And leave us all to fate. In despair,
Bennett Mathews rationed the candles out
For eating, or for frying the bones of fowl
Which then we ate as though they were a feast.
Day on day we wandered further east
No longer caring where we sailed, or why,
Though Robert Billett sought to have us work
And tried to drive us on; yet he failed,
For each grey skull that rolled from side to side
Was captured by a ghost which bid him sit
On deck and watch the sails fly loose, without
A care to tie them down to catch the wind.
The sun and stars moved round the skies, the waves
Beat on our flanks a rhythm dull with sleep
As men slipped down behind their eyes; and then
'A sail!', the cry went up, 'dear God, a sail!',
Which snapped each eye open towards the sight,
The fairest yet I ever saw. It came
To signal our return out of the grave.
Forgive me, sir, if I now weep with joy
But that was how our voyage came to end
In Galway Bay; from there home to the Thames
Where Sir Dudley heard my full report:
The truth, I swear, before Almighty God!"

On those words the Prosecutor stood

And bowed respectfully before the judge
Whose nod towards the prisoner proclaimed
That he should now be taken from the dock
And back down to his cell, there to await
The judgement of the Court. In silence, led
Out of that solemn chamber by the guard,
Abacuck Prickett prayed that he'd convinced
The jury he was innocent, but when
He once again sat down inside his cell
An air of doom came creeping into his bones.
Young Walsingham — he looked around — was gone:
Found guilty of a crime no more than his,
And taken home for hanging by the neck
Till dead, aye dead! The thought consumed his brain
And set his mind on fire with nagging doubt:
Had he not given aid to Henry Greene,
And did he not devise the oath that bound
The rebels in their cause; and thus was he
Not guilty like the others, all now dead,
Whose ranks he surely would be forced to join.
The truth — the doubt — the truth, it must prevail:
Yet doubt will oftentimes upset the scales —
The scales, he thought, leant back against the wall,
And weighed the evidence from vivid scenes
That flashed in quick succession under the lids —
The drooping lids — that sealed the drooping head.
Exhausted by the trial, there he slept.

The rattling keys and shooting bolt awoke
Him — startled. When? He knew not when, for light
Of day had never reached that wet dirt floor.
The guard, expectant, waited as he slowly rose
And placed his first uncertain step inside
The corridor — its watching walls a blur
Behind the stone pronouncements of a clock
That tolled his coming; past the frozen eye

Of every turning face, through wide oak doors,
And up the last three steps to reach the dock.
He stood in silence, gripping with both his hands
The rail aboard the *Discovery;* he recognized
The crew assembled on the deck, his mates
Before become his jury. Now the judge
Solemnly read the charges at length and paused
To pay respect to gravity, and then
Slowly raised his eyes to meet Prickett's.
"The verdict of this Court: Not Guilty!
I give you leave to go, a free man."
The scene dissolved as ruddy faces beamed
Their joy, a sight he locked forever in
His heart; and willing shoulders carried him
Aloft, out in to the bustling street
Where the morning sun glistened on his eyes
And every man and woman took his hand.

JOHN FRANKLIN, HIS ENTERPRISE

PRELUDE

St. Valentine's Day Poem

by

Eleanor Porden
(Mifs Greenstockings)

1823

The Esquimaux Girl's Lament

Yes! Yes! thou art gone to the climes of the East;
Thou hast welcomed the Sun as he springs from the Sea;
And thou car'st not though Sorrow lie old in my breast
Though the night of the Grave may be closing on me,
Yet, though bright are his beams in those changeable skies,
Where he dawns but to set, and descends but to rise,
Though on wonders I dream not, his lustre may shine
He warms not one bosom more constant than mine.

And what if the Daughters of Albion be Fair
With their soft eyes of azure and tresses of Gold?
To the Flowers of their meadows their charms I compare
They bloom in the sunshine, but shrink from the cold;
But I through the snow and the Forest would guide thee
On the ice covered Lake I would gambol beside thee
With the thongs of the Reindeer thy buskins would weave
And dress thy light meal as thou slumber'st at Eve.

Nay Frown not! Thou know'st that such moments have been,
    Though cruel as false, thou could'st calmly depart;
Thy comrade too truly has pictured the scene,
    And my Form . . . but thine own, it is drawn on my heart!
Nor think in thy Green Isle some Fair one to woo,
For in tempest and snow shall my vengeance pursue,
My bidding at noonday shall darken the air,
And the rage of my climate shall Follow thee there.

But return! . . . I have gathered thee dainties most rare,
    The wild birds that soar, and the fish from the sea;
The Moose and the Reindeer, the Fox and the Bear,
    In a snow mantled grotto I guard them for thee.
How happy our long day of Summer shall prove
And our long night of Winter, when brighten'd by Love
When the Moon and the Stars are abroad in the sky
And the brisk Northern Meteors are dancing on high!

Return! and the tempest shall pause in his wrath;
    I will breathe out my spells on the land and the sea.
Return! and the Ice shall be swept from thy path,
    Nor the winds nor the waves dare be rebels to thee.
Spread thy canvas once more, keep the Pole Star before thee
'Tis Constancy's type and thy Beacon of Glory,
By the Lake, by the Mountain, the Forest, the River,
In the wilds of the North, I am thine, and for ever.

THE LETTER

July 21st

1821

Hyperborean Sea, near
the Coppermine River.
July 21st, 1821

My Dearest Miss Porden:

You cannot imagine the joy in my heart as I take up my pen on the shore of the blue Polar Sea, and I know I shall fail to convey the delight of a wandering mariner when he sets eyes on the source of his life. At the mouth of the Coppermine River we ended our trek to the north, and have launched out due east to explore every mile on a coast that is lately released from the menacing ice which lies sulking off shore.

First I must tell you our party is smaller (much smaller in fact) than I planned at the start when we sailed for Stromness: besides Doctor Richardson, only one officer, midshipman Hood, was on board when we left. (As fortune would have it, midshipman Back missed the sailing from Yarmouth but doggedly travelled the length of the country, by carriage and horse, to arrive at Stromness quite exhausted, though not much the

worse).He found us in time to embark for our crossing — past Iceland and Greenland and on — till we saw Hudson Strait with its forest of icebergs in fog. It was here that our mission was halted before it began; the wind disappeared and we drifted towards two spectacular pillars of rock whose bare flanks loomed alongside our own; the shock of collision sprang the ship's rudder and left us disabled as well as distressed; as we struggled to lower the boat, a second great impact — portending disaster — replaced the sprung rudder and left us (still floating) with wounds underwater — the cause of much weeping, as much in the eye as the foot of the bilge.

Soon the sea cleared and we reached Savage Island where Eskimo women and men came to barter for spoons, pots and knives with their animal skins and the virtue of wives and of daughters. (It seems their behaviour is lacking in true Christian virtue). But not long delayed we continued our voyage across Hudson Bay to drop anchor in Five Fathom Hole and receive Governor Williams' welcome.

That night, in a deluge of rain, we were taken up river to visit York Factory, which establishment takes on the desolate scene of a shipwreck: not only in structure, but through the attire of inhabitants, and their activities. Traders must suffer great inconvenience and hardship in periods of long isolation, which end — now and then — in a burst of exuberant joy; but such is their love of this freedom few of them

ever come back to a civilized life. To my
utter astonishment, commerce in these parts has
turned into war, where clansmen will instigate
acts of such violence they challenge the law. In the
Hudson Bay Company jail at York Factory
lay an unfortunate group of their rivals whose
detention enabled my colleagues and I to gain
knowledge first hand; and whose story of
rivalry stayed with us month after month as we
begged for supplies and support which, in London, their
officers promised in faith we should have.

Let me, Miss Porden, attempt to describe how the
rivers are roads in this unbroken land, where a
York boat becomes a stout carriage, though
horseless, that carries your burden (or you
carry it). I must tell you we rowed when the
current allowed us, a good many miles in each
day; and each night we lay camped round a fire, our
bedding spread out upon buffalo hides which
afforded us warmth when the chill of the dawn put its
steam in our breath. Where the torrent outran every
effort to row, we all disembarked to
become beasts of burden that seek, along
towpaths that lie in the mind, for a footing; on
reaching each fall we unloaded the boat and
carried it bodily, lifting it high upon
shoulders that ached till the portage was done, and
backs once again were contented to bend over
oars. On one such occasion, while mounting a
gorge, my footing gave way and I tumbled
quite helplessly down to the river which
carried me off to the brink of the falls. The
sheer rock walls, their faces as flawless as
death, swept by me, and no one could
reach me until by God's grace I

grabbed at a willow branch — clung till they
found me — and stumbled, exhausted, to rest on the
rock. It was there, as I looked at the deep of the
evergreens clinging for life on the verge of
destruction, while not far away the willow and
dogwood mingled bright gold with the richest
red hues — it was there for a moment I
saw with the eye of an artist, so startling it
seemed for a mind trained in conduct of war.
In the
dead of the winter our journey continued, though
water could not either move or obstruct us. We
travelled instead with a sled pulled by ravenous
dogs, so untamed and voracious they ate out the
settlement windows; but yet they could travel where
horses would perish, in temperatures so cruel the
mercury froze; and the voyageurs' garb was then
worn by us all. On our feet we wore moccasins
strapped on to racquets on which we were able to
walk upon snow drifts by spreading our weight over
leather lace treads. From experience, no one would
walk half a mile without snowshoes, but no one would
wear them at all if their journey was less than essential; they
drag like a weight and persistently gall till your
blood flecks the snow in your tracks. A
rival affliction — strange irony — comes from the
radiant sun which reflects from the snow in such
brilliance it dazzles the eyes, hypnotically
blinding you day after day. Small wonder, at
night, when his burden is shed, each man shows the
utmost delight in the prospect of clearing the
snow and preparing a bed of soft branches to
spread near a fire that crackles joyfully
warming many a heart and thawing many a tongue.
At the settlements, comfort is

scarcely much more, and I find it is
most disagreeable standing between rival
companies — bickering — neither of which (beyond
overt politeness) cares if our mission should
fail or succeed. Fort Chipewyan supplied not a
meal to us, bringing a cry of disgust from the
lips of each voyageur as he went off to
hunt for himself; only one Englishman,
loyal John Hepburn, believed that our party could
ever survive in the north (the rest bring
shame to themselves and disgrace to our country). Our
spirits were raised on the day that we heard from the
Indians whom I had prayed would assist us in
reaching the Coppermine River; our rendezvous
set at Fort Providence, off we all went to the
chant of a paddling song.

On arrival we
dressed in our uniforms, each with a medal that
hung round his neck, and we patiently stood till the
Chief of the Indians, noble Akaitcho, arrived with
great dignity — perfectly silent — until he had
passed through his lips the smoke of his pipe and the
rum from his glass, at which he began his
harangue and expressed much dismay that the good
Doctor Richardson could not bring back from the
dead all his ancestors whom he profusely
lamented as though they were now taken twice; yet he
welcomed us all as chiefs and benefactors
whom, he declared, his tribe truly loved. In
reply I endeavoured to say that His Majesty
wished to provide for his children, the Indians,
merchandise each would desire, but first a
new route must be found for his ships; and the
Indians' assistance would bring its undoubted reward. I was
pleased with this meeting, impressed with Akaitcho, and

took off my medal to hang round his
neck; I invited his tribe to stay for the
singing and dancing — merriment only the
mad voyageurs can provide. In their antics they
imitate everyone else, assuming such
ludicrous postures we laughed till the tears were
blurring our eyes; while Akaitcho sat watching, his
face set so gravely, until he could
not any longer contain himself: slowly he
rose, then burst forth into laughter so violent we
thought he was drunk.

I must tell you, dear lady, that
these Copper Indians are handsome indeed, and their
women so beautiful, one from their midst has
enraptured our midshipmen, both having fallen
beneath her soft spell: her name (from her
dress) is Greenstockings; I vouch that my officers
do not exaggerate when they proclaim her the
belle of her tribe. The lot of an Indian is
wretched indeed: he fights with the snow and the
wind and the hunger, with scarcely possessions to
keep him alive; and should a misfortune
strike hard at his brethren he mourns with
abandon that renders him helpless, as though to
appease the strange gods he obeys — such a
mixture of wisdom and fear in his breast that I
often despair to know what he will think or to
reckon on what he'll do next. We fare little
better with most voyageurs, whose ravenous
appetites, joined with their vocal aversion to
discipline, make them a frequent and boisterous
source of complaint; yet ply them with meat and
tobacco (and rum) and they toil like the devil.

Fort Enterprise (this is the name which I
gave to our winter encampment) is built out of

logs on the brow of a hill: facing south, these
three buildings enjoy a magnificent prospect of
lakes to the east and the west, while before them the
barren grey hills, so arduously traversed, are
constant reminders of just how precarious
life has to be in this land. Our stay at the
Fort gave us each the occasion for measurements
aimed at advancement of science. Perhaps at the
Royal Society lectures you may wish to
mention the following tentative thoughts: on the
nightly aurora, observations suggest that this
splendid phenomenon harbours magnetic reactions; and
midshipman Hood has suggested the earth may
behave like a magnet, with poles at the north and the
south. I am sure you will wish to reflect on these
bold new hypotheses which, if I still have the
honour to visit your home, I would gladly
discuss when I make my return.

I conclude by
describing our voyage of late down the Coppermine,
plagued, I might add, by a million insects
hovering around us by day and by night with their
torment of pins: the mosquitos alone make their
pricks in such numbers the face becomes swollen and
torn through compulsion to scratch; while the flies, showing
no less audacity, bite at the flesh and may
tear it away. Only a breeze brings
relief from these pests, and hence we were anxious to
make our descent to the uninterrupted
expanse of the cool fresh-faced sea; but our
flight was arrested beside Bloody Falls, by a
moment that still lives in infamy.
Here, long ago, an entire encampment of
Eskimo families fell to the pitiless
knives of marauders — the Indians; now, with the

blood on the hands of their ancestors fixed in their minds, came our guides in great peril, and anxious to end this traditional hatred. Our Eskimo guides in the vanguard, immediately found a tribe of their brethren, but just as this contact was made the impatient Akaitcho was seen looking on, to the utter distress of every Eskimo there; and in consequence no one remained in their camp by the time I arrived — except an old man, whose pathetic thrust with a spear (to avenge certain death, so he thought) was brushed to one side with a smile and a gift; such a pity his kin would not meet us, when friendship was offered in faith and a peace might have come to ancestral war.

In ending my letter, I pray that the Lord will continue to bless your good work and exemplary life. And should he see fit to grant equal success to our mission, I can but look forward to seeking the pleasure your company always affords. We plan to return from the coast by the Coppermine River, retracing our steps past the caches the Indians promise to leave. As a safeguard, Akaitcho will stock up Fort Enterprise; thus we are certain that should we encounter a shortage of food on our journey, relief will be found at the Fort, whence I start on my voyage for home.

I remain,
your obedient servant
John Franklin

TURNING POINT

August 17th
1821

Today, and yet another day
this rolling bark creeps out
across ten miles of sea
on legs that dip again,
again and drip
their chilling tears to see
the morning sun rise bleary eyed
behind old Neptune's foggy breath
aground upon the silent cliffs.
The waiting shore
unfolds our fellow man
in implement
in remnant
but in vain
I seek his presence waiting:
shifting fog unveils
the water's edge and spreads
a boundless sea, a wonder
startling to these voyageurs:
plunge
and pull and lift
plunge
and pull and lift;
rhythm
endless
drawing
us
throughout the fading day.
Fear rises as they watch
the darkening storm swell near

scrambling them ashore to tents
whipping about the quivering poles, leaving
each man crouched and naked,
wrapped in awe, staring
open-mouthed to see his craft
from bow to stern
so small against the rising wave
whose towering, frothing tongue
speaks out
to every one
and turns my inner eye
towards the shifting season.
Soon
my mission must be summed:
the many miles that lie
already plotted against us
twist
and veer
past every cape and inlet
stretching end-to-end to Hudson Bay;
but here I stand, and still
the task half done.
I cannot tell
nor can I ask if this great shore
will bring York Factory
to a captain's glass.
My dear Parry,
twin in this bold venture
on the boreal sea,
I come
to keep our rendezvous. Have you
come and passed?
Are men reaching out towards me,
trailing off
to leave a broken ship?

Why
can only I see
north by east, there
above the faint horizon
such an eerie glow
that pricks my eye,
and hooks me
in its unexpected glare?
Is this the day to call a halt?
to leave upon the chart
the empty white?
abandoning the quest —
— ion, gone beyond
the cries of Captain Parry's men
if they should stagger up the shingle
falling to their knees.
But then
in snow and ice
what comfort could I give
surrounded by the barren rocks,
and how could man alive
then learn the secrets
of our records and our lives,
if all this voyage
adds to nought
but flotsam on a frozen beach
with nought to teach
the mariners who seek our wake.
Walking . . .
. . . on this shore, deserted:
here I pull
the lifeline taut
and at this Point
Turnagain
to face the homeward south. This

is our farthest fling!
But doubt,
my grey companion, loiters,
his stilling breath upon my cheek.
Should we retrace our charted path
along that westward coast where winds
are now tormenting towers of ice
to snarl along the shore, and like
the wolf's bared teeth prepared to savage
any living thing that falls
too near the jaw?
Or dare we risk a race with time
across the barren tundra lying still
uncharted, praying that the rocks
would fail to stay our legs, knowing
not one cache lies along
the painful thread of our return?
Is this a choice of death?
Dear God, I beg
for every soul that lies within my sacred charge
your guidance:
help me weigh this question.

South!

We will
strike
south
and like
the
geese
take flight
across
the
barrens
to our
winter
home.

THE TREK

August 18th - October 29th
1821

The rain begins
splashing on the tent
relentlessly; insistent
tapping on an ancient drum
that beats away the hours;
chilled drops spread
their comfortless infusion, lashed
in streaking fingers
by the cruel child
of the same lofty wind
that gashed the surface of the sea
a thousand times:
I saw it heave in agony,
its whitened wounds
dissolving into green impenetrable.
Amid the cheers
the moment has arrived.
I bring
our outward journey to an end:
tomorrow
we take flight and start
our journey to Fort Enterprise.
Dinnerless
abed we wake
to find the tranquil surf
a moment to be gone
in quick and forceful strokes

matching our heartbeats
full of merry song, ringing
sounds across the sea.
At night the sea came up
to shudder through the hushed tent,
rough cloak against the storm.
Dissolving fear,
our hunger drove us out again
upon the boiling sea
to where the raging wind
thrusts his fist inside our sails
and heaves us
over hollow waves
whose ever-changing flanks rise
windowless
beneath the frowning sky, a threat
to spill us in an instant's disregard.
Waiting
for the dying moments
of our strength
when hearts reach earnestly ashore
this fickle wind
incites the sea to burst
in spray above the jutting rock
and swirl unseen across
the ragged gravel floor.
Two days more until
we find the river
patient as we turn
our backs upon the furious polar sea
and reach upstream
as far as willing strokes
would carry us
before the setting sun
decreed the long day's journey done,

and feet began
to dance, with many a tongue
freely wagging, spilling out
such tales
as caught the haunted voyageurs'
imagination, fired
by relief so welcome and spontaneous
I laughed
at their exaggerations, laughed
and wondered
just how long since we had laughed
and laughed not knowing
we might never laugh again.
Today
we face the river,
but its force imprisons
us along the banks
and holds each shoulder
forward, leaning hard
against the rope that ties
us to an endless track until,
the heavy pulling done,
we flop
exhausted, looking up
in wonder at tumultuous falls
cascading
high above — their deafening chorus ringing
words that bid us break
our large canoes
and from the carcases construct
two smaller vessels, light
enough upon the back
of any man, yet passage
over water rushing
still.

We have to flee southwest
abandoning each pound
not vital to survival
in this wasteland where
the chart at each day's end
still stares up blank (but
for a candle flame
to warm the ink and light
the crawling scratch that marks our way).
Two days,
and three and four we must
have marched, canoes aloft
in buffeting winds before
the hearty shouts of men, drenched
by rain and chilled
by falling snow, fell
silent to the mountain
of fatigue.
Stopped, we chew the last
remaining morsels
of our pemmican; lie
and listen in our tents
to midnight
rain beat upon the canvass till
the early morning wind
flies up with snow, howling
on throughout the day and showing
us its frigid scheme.
Inside each tent it penetrates
much deeper than the drifts
it piles around my feet
all day. No abatement yet
in sight,
and having spent another hungry night
we rise, stiff with frost,

beset by bitter winds,
and break
camp to start once more
upon our trek; but when I stood
the misty sky came loose
and circled in a careless
arc to fall
upon the ground where anxious
faces stand above me;
now I knew that I had been
the first to fall beneath
the ceaseless call
the trek now made upon us.
Soon revived,
I set us off, a ragged line across
the snow and over sheets
of ice that cracked beneath
our feet and plunged
us to our knees in stinging water,
sharp with edges
shattered while, beneath the murk,
the slippery stones conspired
with the wind
to throw the balanced burden
of each canoe in force
upon the frozen rocks;
and when the man had struggled
bravely to his feet,
repeat the blow and knock
him down again,
until the wind had
had enough
and left the bleeding fingers holding
overhead triumphantly our sole
surviving vessel.

On we march across this rock,
each barren day our step
still slower than the last,
every night our empty stomachs
twisting
in a tightening grip and pleading
for relief. Excitement
caught us there behind a sudden ridge —
a herd of muskox grazing
unawares: our hunters
call a halt and bid
us wait while they creep
infinitely slowly
round down wind
and crawl towards their ever
vigilant prey. With bated breath
and silent prayer we
see the muskets raised . . .
. . . the shots
snap out across the brittle
air, and scatter those
great beasts — bring us all alive:
there
before us on the plain below
a noble bull lies
dead; and instantly
we run and fall
upon it, cutting up the carcase,
quick to eat
the contents of its stomach, chew
with relish
on its raw intestine:
we lit a fire and devoured
every scrap of meat.
But this relief has been

too long in coming
and our hunger, though at last abated,
soon returns to gnaw
upon the mind, constantly
reminded by the empty belly;
on the lining
of the earth's great stony stomach
tripe de roche
lies scattered here
and there, and if assiduously gathered
will assuage our hunger,
with its bitter juice
dissolving us within.
At length our painful plodding
progress brought us
to this lake today when
we can fish; but not
till now was I to know
the voyageurs have cast our nets
away and thus in gratifying
each his own desire
has denied the desperate need
of all. Such selfishness
and folly brings my sharp rebuke,
and hangs about my heart
a stone contempt
for those who bring us
to starvation. Seeing
my despondency, Perrault
reached deep inside
his sack and brought out scraps
of meat (his own
reward for suffering
self denial from his meagre rations)
and offered me a piece

and then the others,
sharing with us all
his small and final feast.
This kindness comes
so unexpectedly, it springs
up into my unbelieving eye
the swelling tear
that overflows and pours
its miniature libation
down a trembling cheek. Filled
with new determination,
on we trudged to find a river
spilling from the lake.
Three hundred yards
across, this furious stream
would challenge Belanger
(*le gros*) who,
with myself and St. Germain, ignored
the bitter wind and climbed
aboard our small canoe;
I pushed off, heading
across the water raging
all around us
in a fight to take us down
inside the boiling rapids
where we shot
and spilled. But holding firm,
waist deep upon a solitary rock,
Belanger stood
till St. Germain and I
were both aboard again,
and knew the moment
he released his grip our boat
would sweep downstream
and leave him there

alone,
isolated from the shore.
My eye caught his
in roaring silence
as he let the flood pick up our craft,
and there he stood
as we sought desperately to stay
afloat, and reached the other side.
St. Germain,
ashore, picked up the boat
and ran on quivering legs
upstream, bent
upon the rescue. Barely could I see
the tiny craft atop the hissing foam
shoot past,
headed for Belanger,
but way downstream it ran —
upturned — while St. Germain was dragged
to shore by comrades; then
I knew that Belanger still stood
not daring one step forward
in the icy flood that swirled
about his waist and cast
up in the cutting wind
a spray that froze his flesh.
I heard him cry
in agony and beg us for assistance
which, alone upon the further shore,
I could not give;
and paced along the bank until
I saw our fragile craft
was launched once more.
How I wailed aloud
to see it hurtle past poor Belanger —
but yet again they tried —

and yet again,
until, when hope had gone,
a slender cord flicked out
to touch his frozen fingers
which, in claw-like grip, hung on
while willing hands pulled steadily
to draw him to the shore,
and warm his cold white flesh
against their own.
Only now have I become aware
of loss: my papers
letters
journal
and my scientific notes
are gone; and only now
dare I reflect, as one
by one the men are ferried
over, how I would have fared
alone and lost. These thoughts
stayed with me as we loaded
up and started
walking . . .
. . . past
the white-topped crags . . .
. . . down
across the stony plain,
blisters bleeding on my haunted thoughts . . .
. . . wading
through the deepening snow while
lengthening days cast up
their shivering nights
to hold us restless, wishing
not to stir nor stay.
Night and day combined
an endless grey routine that broke

beside a lake
as men who had abandoned
our canoe now refused to go
and fetch it, forcing us
along the endless shore
to westward till the lake was whittled
down to form a river
which I recognized at once —
the Coppermine!
What a tantalizing stretch
to bridge; with ease
in only one small boat,
but infinitely wide with none.
Bitter words
this day called forth their harsh rebukes
as men disputed where they stood
and would not lend
a willing hand to build
another boat. My noble friend,
the doctor, watching how
denial and despair devoured
our will, gave us a lesson:
taking off his shirt
he plunged into the icy waters,
swimming (with a rope about his waist)
as strongly as his slender frame could pull.
Twice
he disappeared among the waves
while anxious eyes
sought out his tiring arms,
and bitten lips
revealed the hopes that hung
upon his fast receding strength.
He turned on his back
and though his arms fell limp

he kicked his legs and slowly edged
towards the shore,
when suddenly —
he sank; and every man,
so fixed before, pulled
furiously upon the rope
that tied him to us, bringing back —
a skeleton —
to drop on the shore.
And then we saw
how piteous was his state
and ours
as men in chorus raised their voices:
'Ah!
que nous sommes maigres.'
Yet, a fire
and blankets quickly applied
brought back to life
this man who nearly died to bring us all
together
across the river.
St. Germain began to build
a new canoe from willow stems
and called for every piece
of painted canvass we could find;
for three full days
we toiled before that fragile craft
could deftly slip
upon the unforgiving torrent,
and take the desperate dreams
that lie
behind the eyes of all
that stand
and watch skillful St. Germain
negotiate each rock

and swirl to reach
the other bank and, with his rope
held taut, ferry us one by one
aboard that basket,
bidding every man lie flat
along the slopping bilge
as he guided us to the further shore
where each would wring
the others' hands, relieved
to know Fort Enterprise
was only a few days' march.
But we are now
so weak I ordered
midshipman Back ahead with
St. Germain
Beauparlant
and Belanger (*le gros*)
to reach the Fort and hasten
our relief which if it does not come
within a day or two
will find us too far gone
to plough our way through thickening snow.
Our pace comes
creeping slow . . .
. . . and slower yet
as dark starvation takes
its dismal toll:
Crédit
has dropped unseen behind a rise;
Vaillant fell
upon his knees
and then collapsed. I grieve
I do not have the strength
to help them to our camp,
and lie awake at night,

shivering in my frozen clothes, unwilling
to predict the next to fall.
I know that now
our party must be split
again: the weak must stay
behind and not delay
the strong who have to struggle
on to save us all; but I
am ill-prepared to face
young Hood's courage
as he softly says he must
stay; or can I listen
to the doctor's insistence he
(and Hepburn) must remain as well.
I cast around
in vain for words to clothe
my feelings as I said farewell
to my beloved friends
whose willingness to sacrifice
themselves for others will forever
live with me. And on
our painful way,
before another day has passed our last
remaining strength begins
to die with terrifying speed:
Michel and J-P Belanger
can not keep up the pace
and stagger in to camp
that night desperate in their plea
to rest and then return
to Dr. Richardson's camp.
And I agree but fail
to contemplate that stark exhaustion
will be stalking Perrault and Fontano
who have both collapsed

before two miles have fallen
behind us; looking up,
they beg me to allow them to return.
It is the only mercy
I have left to give
before I turn away, as one
of six determined souls, tuck down my head,
and lean
against the freezing wind
that whines its long complaint,
matching our every effort
with rebuff and stopping
our slow deliberate steps
with each capricious breath that swirls
the gentle snowflakes
tiny crystals of ice
until they pile up
millions high
in walls of solid white.
For two eternal days
we heave each aching limb
in turn ahead and stand it
on the swaying brink
of every drunken step until
at last I gasp
and call a halt in failing light, blinking
my eyes before familiar scenery:
no more than one
day's march beyond us
is our goal! I could not sleep
that feverish night, my brain
alive with messages transporting
me towards the Fort, and when
we rose at dawn our shoulders
lifted lighter burdens. Deep fatigue

which dragged around our ankles
suddenly cut loose, leaving
each of us to walk alone
within reflective silence; none
of us could sense
the hours drifting by until
that welcome log construction
came in sight, and we
were home! Anticipation ran
throughout my mind, a riot,
as I crunched the last
few steps towards the house
and found, instead
of warmth and welcome
arms — a frozen emptiness;
and suddenly the desolation of the scene came
crushing through my eyes.
Dumb, I watched
as broken bodies
swaying in the door,
aghast, could not believe
that here awaiting us
was no relief from
pain
hunger
cold; stringless
bones began to sink when
no one answered
to our shouts, and I had read aloud
a cheerless note
from Mr. Back: the Indians
had failed to leave
a store of food, and he had gone
to seek them not yet knowing
where they pitched their winter

camp (and failing that would start
towards Fort Providence,
which well I knew was far
beyond his strength). I sat
and stared down deep
into the earth beneath
my feet, listening to the wind
howl through the ragged parchment
mouth that gaped
from every window; scornfully
victorious, at 25 below;
a frozen gauntlet flung
across my unprotected face —
a bitter blow. I vowed
if God Almighty
would sustain my will then I would go
myself to find
Akaitcho. Strength
is slow to rise again from bodies
forced to rest upon
their long exhaustion, but with Benoit
and Augustus I began
a desperate walk that carried me
no further than one hundred yards
before each snowshoe
hung, a leaden weight
that stuck to the snow and tore
my wasted legs, whose lift
and lurch dragged on —
a day
a night
until my giddy step came down
between two hidden rocks
and smashed the shoe.
I sat exhausted in

the trampled snow and looked up
as Benoit and Augustus turned
to wait:
"Go on!"
"Go on!," I called
in heavy
breaths
"Go on —
and leave me
to return."

And as I said these words
to my departing friends I swear
I heard Michel,
who first had knelt as I now was,
begging for relief, watching
his comrades disappear ahead;
I swear the lonely steps
I took towards the Fort
were haunted by his hollow laugh
as though to mock
my private agony, knowing
that I should soon discover
Samandré and Adam had become
too weak to help
poor Peltier in his heavy task of tearing
up the floor to feed
the fire. Frail
frames, we lay in silence
in our darkened room, oblivious
to the scattered filth
and caring less each day
about ourselves, but faithful
in our prayers for our companions,
dying,
waiting, hoping for the word

that would not come. Each long
and blackened night our only comfort
was the fire whose glow turned
sallow bearded faces into phantoms
floating half
in sleep and half in waking where
imagination drifts
at will and
drops
unnoticed
gently
into a dream.

THE DREAM

October 29th

1821

One foot, and then the other
dips
and slips beneath the kissing warmth
of water clear and round
remembrance of some womb
of pink and tender flesh
floating in the radiance, snug
inside the tingling caress of rippling heat,
flowing and swelling
to fill the pulsing limb.
In silken gown
my full and acheless frame sits quietly
before a table spread:
with steaming broth
a loaf of bread
potatoes roasted
blood red beef
thick gravy
spilling over peas;
a glass of claret
grapes and cheese
scorched pudding
white sauce,
and in a china pot
amber tea
piping hot;
the glow of dancing
candles lights the room,

ruddy faces laugh and drink
a toast to ring my ears with childish joy
and bring to ready brain
the place where I was born:
Spilsby,
where boyhood dreams
came to visit me in carriages,
stiff and haunting figures looking
down from knowing eyes
seldom speaking, yet to say
I would not understand;
they can not see
how much a boy would know:
so much more that school can teach
in subjects that are far beyond
the reach of daily lives. Dear brother Tom
brim full of bank affairs
and Willingham
wigged barrister-at-law
with judge's airs,
you cut such fine examples;
never mine.
I dare remain
unmoved by father's stern reproach
and suffer undeterred the birch's stroke.
I
can only see a pitching, rolling deck
on which I resolutely stand
to serve His Majesty, in glory,
or till death will close a young man's eyes.
But who among us thought of death
when off we sailed to Copenhagen;
there the castle Elsinore
where tortured Hamlet paced
the corridors, and now a thousand cannon
roar

their angry charge; not here on deck
does any one among us flinch
till guns fall silent on the hill,
the wind left to whisper.
Every boy about me grins,
throws his cap aloft;
the deck has come alive
with laughing, boasting men; while
watching them
with speechless eyes, our comrades lie
spreadeagled deep below,
beneath the canopy of lapping waves.
Briskly home
to waves along the pier
from welcome hands
happy friends and you,
my Eleanor,
standing
quietly alone
surrounded by the jostling crowd that animates
your silence;
you speak
with crystal freshness
of the places
you have been
and the faces
you have seen;
of every tiny task
that occupies a world uncharted by a man
as plain as me. What can I say?
Your manners are so fine
and mine
were learned upon the quarterdeck in discourse
with the howling wind
and brimming sea whose jealousy

I dare not ever forget; but yet
you capture me in words:
upon the printed page,
or from your lips;
if they should spring from you
they spring a trap for me;
and I am gladly caught,
taught philosophy
by such a don, and
schooled in verse
by such a gentle bard.
Take up your pen and I will take you
through my eyes
to Spitzbergen: along the ocean's edge;
glistening and ghostly overhead
rise great cliffs of ice; their origin,
what could it be?
What their fate?
A crew of four rows gently
while we probe the silent ice;
suddenly
it breaks out with a thunderous roar
and splits itself
a giant jutting jaw,
one hundred thousand tons
plunging down into the sea,
spouting spray and vanishing
beneath its boiling wake.
Stunned awe
transforms itself to fear as this great white colossus
rears up,
vengeance in its milky eye,
torrents
cascading down its massive flanks
which beat

the towering rings of waves,
lifting
our little boat to hurl it on the beach;
deluge
after deluge swirling water sweeping
men of straw about
the brimming boat:

Almighty God!
thy will be done:
praised be thy name.
Deliver me
from enemies I face
in battle; bring
Lord Nelson's fleet
this day
to victory.

A silent prayer
I speak above the deafening guns
which point blank pound
their vicious iron balls deep
within the bleeding hulls;
my ear has caught
a punctuating musket
crack,
again,
again;
and men on men
drop dead about the deck.
I turn
to catch my captain's eye and catch
his falling frame:
I scream
aloud my best friend's name
and hear again the crack —
too late;

he looks at me blank-eyed and
falling, points aloft
where now I see,
along a span,
the marksman stretched,
his musket aimed
with one eye closed,
the other eye
meets mine.
Mondieu! Mondieu!
Le monde! Le monde! . . .

RICHARDSON'S STORY

"Le Monde!"
a hollow voice called through the smoke,
"Ah, le monde!"
Again it came —
with it standing in the door an apparition
gaunt and tilted.
Richardson!
and Hepburn too
had stirred me with their sudden entry,
unannounced. Our arms
and voices rose in welcome.
Friends!
Amis!
as though they had escaped
the yawning grave (and left me
wondering why Hood was not with them.
Yet I dare not ask).
Good and faithful Hepburn,
reaching deep inside his coat,
pulled out a partridge, newly shot,
and placed it in the naked flame
till each pink morsel of its flesh
was ready for our running mouths.
We ate, and Dr. Richardson
implored us to be cheerful,
chastising us for the disarray that shocked
his ministering eyes. Tomorrow,
he and Hepburn will be hunting
for the three elusive deer

whose silent doleful faces
more than once have tantalized
us knowing nobody
has strength enough to reach within
a shot. Poor Richardson, emaciated,
practising his healing
art, looks deep into my eyes
and begs me lift
my hollow, gloomy voice, yet
unaware of sepulchral tones
that shroud his own.
We sat alone and then I heard
his grave, disturbing tale:
"On your departure,
leaving Hood and I
and Hepburn
by the fire,
we rested and imbibed
a cup of wild leaf tea
which added nothing
of nutrition, but
it warmed our fingers
and our tongues
which wagged awhile
before we fell asleep.
Next day
without the prospect of a fire
or a bite of food
we all stayed tucked
beneath our stiffened blankets,
singing
with the wind in chorus,
and reading to each other
words of God
whose presence filled our minds

with calm and cheer
which blossomed into welcome
when Michel came
stumbling into camp
with word
that Belanger might follow
if he had not gone astray.
How innocent we were
and grateful when
Michel held out a partridge
and a hare
and gave to us such unexpected joy.
In two more days
we were restored
enough to rise and seek a better camp
(though suffering Hood
could barely stand and swayed as
though he was about to fall);
in tottering steps
we dragged
our weary and unwilling bodies
back and forth until
the move was ended
and we sank upon the snow. Michel
had long since vanished
with the axe
but suddenly appeared
at dusk with meaty bones
to satisfy our ache;
the carcase of a wolf,
he said,
(but later we would wonder
as we watched his manner every
day more closely).
He would not share

our tent at night,
but slept beside the fire
often leaving us
before the dawn
without an explanation: an Iroquois
compelled by tribal urge.
Suspicion rose when
he refused to take us,
any one, to hunt with him,
and snarled between his teeth
if any man would dare
to ask a question;
his moods swung violently
between belligerence
and deep despair,
which made me wonder
if we faced insanity,
or witnessed his return
to primal life. He went
to fetch the blanket of the dead
Vaillant;
whatever else he took
from our lamented friend
I cannot tell,
but when Michel returned
he haughtily displayed
two pistols in his belt
and strutted through the camp
defiantly, openly despising us
despite his morbid fear
of what we might have said
when he was gone.
On Sunday
I attempted to prevail
upon his goodness —

but to fail, and watch him
linger near the fire
on false pretence
to clean his gun,
locked in heated argument
with Hood (while Hepburn left to cut
a tree).
Reluctantly I went to gather
tripe de roche,
but had not ventured far
before a shot cracked
sharply through the air.
Yet seeing no good reason to return
I bent again upon my task
until
an agitated Hepburn bid me
come in haste —
and which I did to find poor Hood
his forehead stained
by blood
sprawled forward,
there beside the fire —
a book of scripture open
by his side.
My despair,
thinking Hood's own hand
had done the deed,
was soon replaced by horror
when I saw the burn mark
on his cap
where, at the back, the deadly ball
made its brutal entry,
shot from a gun
too long for Hood to reach
and pull the trigger

from behind!
The shock of this act
shot through my brain
as I beheld Michel
protesting loud
against the accusations
none of us had made —
or dared to make —
when terror stalks;
and only then did I recall
his gruesome jest
not many days ago
when he had said
'You better kill
and eat me!'
Neither I nor Hepburn
breathed a solitary word,
aware
Michel's mad eyes
would never leave us
for one moment unobserved.
At length
we started on our painful march
to reach the Fort,
at which Michel knew well
he must arrive alone;
but doubtful of the route
he stayed with us,
exhibiting that we were both —
accursed whites —
within his power.
Soon there came
the hour when he could find his way —
alone —
and tarried,

while the two of us walked on
and talked,
at last,
of how we both faced
certain death
unless this madman's life
was forfeit to our own.
This grave task
I took upon myself,
and by God's name I swear
I would have stayed my hand
had not my dear companion's life
been placed in danger;
here was my responsibility.
And when Michel caught up again
I shot him
through the head,
and left him like his victims
lying dead upon the clean white snow.
The rest
of this most tragic tale
is nothing
but the copy of your own
protracted journey
here where all our hopes
and all our fears,
now more than ever, seek release
in prayer."
The shock of these events
transfixed me
as I shared the doctor's burden
and distress;
I could not find a single word
to measure out my grief,
or bring a single tear

to bathe the brutal facts.
Such valiant men . . .
Crédit
Vaillant
Perrault
Fontano
Belanger
and Hood . . .
. . . were dead.

THE LAST DAYS

October 30th - November 7th

1821

Dare I reveal my
innermost feelings to
my comrades . . .
. . .No! . . .
their suffering I
must take upon myself to ease.
Richardson and Hepburn stalk
the wary deer
while I remain:
captain once, now
become the dogged scavenger
who scrapes powder
snow away and digs
for buried skin and bone;
what irony: I search for what I am;
this frozen refuse heap,
discarded, holds the only sustenance
that fills
my shaking hands:
singed skin
parchment
putrid bones
I pound
for bitter broth.
What is it flows so readily
to fill the empty eyes of Samandré

and Peltier, both
no longer strong enough
together now to drag the wood
in ever smaller pieces
to the fading fire which
has turned its back and will
not warm them; Adam too,
the sharp relief
the doctor's knife has given
gone, and oozing
from his swollen body,
fluids, vapours breathing out
despair. All
the gentleness my weeping hands can hold
is not enough
to serve one moment's ease
to gullets parched and raw.
Today
without a word
poor Peltier slid
from stool to bed
like an autumn leaf, to rest
asleep;
but inside his red throat
a dreaded rattle calls,
a chilling snake that crawls
its way about my flesh, ice looped
around the bone:
and then in horror I recall
his prophecy —
that on this very day,
the first of this November, he
would die!
Death comes to visit us
unseen

to start his patient work this night,
wrapping poor Peltier
in his swirling cloak: Samandré,
fearful he has felt the brushing
hem, collapses on the earthen floor:
inconsolable
and blind behind his sunken staring eyes.
The ghostly light of dawn
comes every day to haunt us,
painting flesh to match
the cold grey ash that lies in the grate:
endings
stirred to mark beginnings.
Now two corpses lie beside us,
stiff, and waiting for the grave
that none of us has
strength enough to dig.
God have mercy.
Help us find your word,
in testament and prayer.
Guide our thoughts
and give us strength to do
your work.
Thy will be done.
Abandoning the unsuccessful hunt,
exhausted,
Richardson and Hepburn return
to find us sitting here
among the dead from whom
our sole distinction is
the thin grey exhalation
of our breath. The hunters face
the task of cutting ice-hard wood:
the last
of their vanishing strength is spent

in cursing
every timed and painful flow
a blunted axehead
shoots through bone and trunk.
Soon their frozen fingers
fail to grip the shaft
which drops from their hands,
neglected in the snow,
and wearily they fall
through the doorway and sink
beside poor Adam
who collapsed and lies before me
in a heap of bones that cry
on every bruising contact
with the split and splintered floor.
Work is now beyond us.
I have failed
in each task undertaken
except in helping others; yet,
despite my growing weakness,
before another day has passed
my comrades will believe me
strongest of the four . . .
. . . the gaunt and derelict
quartet, whose bearded bones
lie propped in awkward pose
amid the gloom. Death
among the shadows shifts
his face at will, my eye
become his servant bid to lead
a wandering mind . . .
Why should I
seek wood?
. . . they can do it . . . Hepburn!
tend the fire.

. . . sloth . . .
Adam!
pound the bones . . . . . and me!
dear God,
what have I left
to offer these valiant men?
Dear friends I beg
of each of you, find
within your heart
forgiveness for
my manner
My comrades, all are weak,
and do not even know
how helpless they have become;
God blind them
from their sprawling ghoulish forms.
The refuse
pit outside lies empty, yawning . . .
. . . our fire
is dying out . . .
. . . the silhouette
of Richardson, my dear companion, rises
struggling to stay
upright, beckoning to Hepburn, calling
him outside
to pull apart the storehouse
walls for firewood . . .
. . . they fade away . . .
. . . leaving me alone
beside the dying Adam
whose faint erratic breathing
is the only sound . . .
CRACK!
A musket shot?
Agitated voices

spring from near the storehouse
where a falling log
will snap a brittle limb.
The doctor shouts for me
and staggers through the doorway;
covering his face,
unbounded joy.
"Relief!"
"Relief!"
he cries, and bends to clasp my heavy hand.
"Relief!"
His eyes catch sight
of disbelief in mine,
and glance across
at Adam's lids now closed.
(Relief.)
But Adam was beyond
all understanding, still and silent
as we set our bony knees
upon the frozen earth and bowed
our miserable heads.
Relief had come in moccasins.
Three Indians,
beings supernatural in frames
that towered over us, moved about
in soft exquisite calm:
to share with us their meat and drink;
to clear
away the stinking debris of our past
decay; and bring
such gentleness and comfort
while our strength restored.
Tortured by his own
deep sorrow and distress,
the great Akaitcho rose,
and sent us relief.

FAREWELL

September 1822 — February 1825

Adieu! Adieu!
to Rupert's Land Adieu!
Flat
against the canvass sings the wind;
ploughing us against the sun to bring
the hailing toast, the grip of unfamiliar hands
ushering me
inside the ring
of words
of praise
of me
throughout my homeland; yet there is no more
to any man
than that
his maker gives.
The burning *ayes* scorch my face
clamp disquiet on my ear
and punctuate the silent feasts:
Ladies!
and!
Gentlemen! (uniformed or no)
quick
to proffer compliments and play
upon conceit. I loathe

their work and take my leave,
quicker to return to you
my Eleanor, who know my heart:
Greenstockings, maid,
since you are mine and I
forever will be yours, let's make
a bond; let it reach beyond
our marriage vows
and carry us unseen across the tundra, past
the quiet bays to live,
love
in endless days and dwell
beneath spectacular dark skies ablaze —
laughter from your eyes.
Yet how
dare I suggest a sacred pledge today
when on tomorrow's tide I must
be gone.
This kiss
and here another, Eleanor,
I place upon your gentle lips
that you may not reproach me;
and your eyes
beneath the soft closed lids
may not betray their liquid grief
and mine
will stay unlogged,
a captain's secret. You and I
hold duty sacred; honour bound
we heed it calling even now:
I am bid to journey
once again upon the Polar Sea
while you, in waiting patiently,
must sigh by every crawling clock
ticking away, ticking away.

O Eleanor, my Eleanor,
I weep to see you lying here
your tiny lungs scarce swelling
in your breast, your breath
too faint to stir a butterfly.
I pray God will stay
the hand of death's erosive power,
fill your lungs
to match your indomitable will
until your work
and mine
is done. I plead
in earnest, you must rest;
but yearn
to hear your sweet small voice
and see the sparkle of your eyes;
your whispers fill my heart
with hope; I wonder
how, of all the words there are,
you know precisely which I most would like
to hear; while I can search
but never find one word
to match my love . . .
. . .my love —
farewell my love.

When next I press your fingers to my lips
I cannot tell
but there in Rupert's Land
and high upon the barren plain
before the unforgiving Polar Sea
Greenstockings, I
will be your eyes
and you
will be my heart.

ENVOI

Opening lines of a prize poem
much admired by Franklin's
second wife, Lady Jane.
1829.

Voyages of Discovery to the Polar Regions

On Northern shores the year's untimely close
Has mantled Nature in her garb of snows;
The glorious Sun is sinking into gloom,
As youth before its time into the tomb;
And in the keen clear air, as fade away
The streamy splendours of departing day,
Fantastic shapes of crystal fretwork gleam,
And drink a borrow'd lustre from his beam.
O'erarch'd with colours bright as those which dye
The sign of Promise in the summer sky,
Shines his last setting: rays of brilliant hue
Spangle the cloudless heaven's unsullied blue,
Like smiles at parting, often loveliest when
The hearts they sever ne'er shall meet again.

T.L. Claughton
Bishop of St Albans
1829

Twenty years after, Lady Jane became the spiritual force behind the search for her husband, missing in the arctic. It was during this search that the Northwest Passage was finally discovered. John Franklin never returned.